

**SPECTATORSHIP AND THE SCREEN AS INTERFACE:  
FRENCH ART USING TELEVISION, VIDEO, AND THE PROJECTED IMAGE  
FROM THE LATE 1960s TO THE PRESENT**

**by**

**STÉPHANIE C. JEANJEAN**

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dr. Claire Bishop \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Examining Committee

Dr. Kevin Murphy \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Executive Officer

Dr. Claire Bishop \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Romy Golan \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. David Gerstner \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Ramon Tio Bellido \_\_\_\_\_

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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**Stéphanie C. Jeanjean**

**Advisor: Dr. Claire Bishop**

This dissertation reconstructs key moments in the history of video-based art in France from the late 1960s to the present day, focusing on the changing relationship between the viewer and the screen, as tested by artists using television, video and the projected image. This study examines the relationship between art and politics by considering how cultural policy along with socio-economical and techno-political frameworks have affected the concept of an ideal viewer. I argue that in France, from the late 1960s to today, the idea of spectatorship changes from a politicized subject who receives a clear message to an autonomous participant invited to interact with the screen as interface, in increasingly apolitical projects. Little known in France and rarely addressed in Anglophone scholarship, the history of French video-based art, and of its politics of spectatorship, constitutes an alternative narrative that departs from the dominant Anglo-American model, and suggests a different understanding of what constitutes a socio-politically informed art practice.

Accordingly, this research reconsiders the little-known beginnings of video in France in the late 1960s and 1970s, examining the work produced by militant feminist collectives

such as *Video Out* and *Les Insoumuses*, and the development of a sociological approach to video, focusing on Fred Forest. It then explains a shift that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s, when video lost its socio-political edge and was guided by formal concerns, here represented by Robert Cahen and Thierry Kuntzel. This change accompanies the institutionalization of video as Video Art, which was inspired theoretically by semiology and postmodernism, and formally by the medium-based orientation of early US video. Finally, I turn to recent works from the 1990s to today: Matthieu Laurette and three artists associated with Relational Aesthetics (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno). I argue that the criticism of Relational Aesthetics by Anglo-American scholars and critics rightly points out the lack of explicit socio-political engagement in these practices, but overlooks the specificities of the French context and the critical dimension of these works that aimed to make the spectator conscious of his or her position as viewer in relation to spectacle.

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This study benefited from various interviews with key figures of the history of video and new media art in France, they include: Christine Van Assche (founder and current Director of the Département Nouveaux Médias, Centre Pompidou, Paris), Anne-Marie Faure-Fraisse (militant videographer, active in the 1970s), Nicole Fernandez-Ferrer (Director of the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, since it reopened in 2005), Fred Forest (video artist, active with sociological art since the late 1960s), Don Foresta (former Director in the 1970s of the American Center in Paris), Matthieu Laurette (new media artist, active since the 1990s), Christian Lebrat (author of numerous books on French experimental cinema also librarian at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky), François Michaud (Chief Conservator at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris), and Etienne Sandrin (Associate to Christine Van Assche at the Centre Pompidou’s Département Nouveaux Médias).

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation reconsiders the history of art using television, video, installation and the projected image by reconstructing key moments of this development in the context of French art and institutional history. It begins with the emergence of an independent video practice when the Sony portable camera – Portapak – became available on the French market, in late 1967. It developed in the 1970s by referring to television, which had by then entered the majority of French households, and with artists who took inspiration from or addressed television, and/or used television monitors or Hertz waves to broadcast content. Television entered French households throughout the 1960s. In 1960, 13% of the households were equipped with a television set; in 1970, 70% were equipped.<sup>1</sup> In France, the 1980s represented the institutionalization of video and its acceptance as a new medium for the visual arts, in the form of Video Art. In this dissertation, there is a typographic distinction made between Video Art (with capitals) to describe the medium-specific iteration whose definition was consolidated in the 1980s and video art (with lower case) to refer more generally to all types of artistic production with video. From then until the present day, Video Art expanded into video installations and works for the projected image, with artists arranging the screen in video projections or multi-channel video installations. Over time, different formal configurations for video-based art

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<sup>1</sup> See Marie-Françoise Lévy, "Les femmes du temps présent à la télévision," in *Les Années 68; Le temps de la contestation*, ed. Maryvonne Le Puloch, Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, and Antoine de Baecque (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 2000), 201-16.

appeared, as well as a more diverse range of subject matters used by artists, which show a clear development of relationships between the viewer and the screen.

In this study of video-based art, the screen is conceived as both a projective and/or reflective surface, most commonly found in television, cinema, and/or computer. It can also refer to the exhibition wall onto which video is projected in gallery or museum setting. Over the past forty years, the (electronic) screen has gradually become omnipresent in the everyday life, as well as in contemporary art. In his introduction to his history of the screen, new media theorist Lev Manovich states: “We may debate whether our society is a society of spectacle or of simulation, but, undoubtedly, it is the society of a screen.” Later, in the same essay, he explains: “The screen, as I defined it (a flat rectangle that acts as a window into the virtual world), makes its appearance in the Renaissance with modern painting.”<sup>2</sup>

Narrated chronologically, this study shows that within the recent history of video as a medium, and in response to specific socio-political and economical contexts, various politics of spectatorship have been envisioned and tested by artists; these become apparent when studying the evolution of the relationship between the viewer and the screen as an interface. The term “interface” originated in late nineteenth century and referred to a surface forming a common boundary, as bodies or regions. It returned to common use in the 1960s, with computer sciences and the development of an electronic technology, to define a point of interaction between components. This conception of the screen as interface, as a point of connection between art and

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<sup>2</sup> Lev Manovich, “An Archaeology of a Computer Screen,” *Kunstforum International*, no. 132 (Fall 1995): 1-15.

audience, is drawn from Roland Barthes's discussion of the relationship between the viewer's body and representational apparatuses (painting, television, film); it is also inspired by Lev Manovich's development of this same definition in the field of new media.<sup>3</sup> Manovich develops a genealogy of the screen and defines the "classical screen" (the screen of fresco, mosaic, and painting) by comparison with the "dynamic screen" (the screen of cinema, television, and video); and explains that in both instances, the screen is a frame that separates two spaces, the physical and the virtual. My dissertation focuses on artists experimenting with the "dynamic screen" and the screen as a *découpage* ("cut-out" or "framing") that can act either as a boundary between the space of representation and that of the viewers, or as a zone in which reality and fiction, and/or virtuality, are elided.

In France, the relationship between the viewer and the screen from the 1960s to the present day has broadly progressed from an emphasis on video as a transparent communicational device to a self-reflexive apparatus for spectatorial experimentation. The earliest video productions in France used the video camera to record and broadcast content; they developed a unilateral relationship with the screen and positioned the spectator as recipient of a strong, politically motivated message. This was representative of post-68 spirit of socio-political contestation, and continued in the 1970s under the presidencies of Georges Pompidou (1969-74) and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974-81). This relationship with the screen quickly changed throughout the 1970s gradually in the 1980s towards more complex forms of interactions

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein, (1973)," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 69-70; Lev Manovich, "The Screen and the User," in *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001), 94-115.

involving feedback and/or various modes of audience participation, but these works now often lacked a clear political message. To a certain extent these works echoed Marshall McLuhan's motto "the medium is the message", permitting a focus on process rather than on the content and/or message of the work. McLuhan's ideas were well known in France in the 1970s, and his book was translated into French as early as 1968.<sup>4</sup>

In France, this shift against presenting an explicit political content with video accompanied the institutionalization of the medium in the visual arts, which occurred within an unsettled political climate: in the 1980s, the country was finally led by a Socialist president – François Mitterrand (elected in 1981 and reelected in 1988) – after a long succession of right-wing governments since Léon Blum (1936-47). Despite the general acknowledgment of a strong socialist tradition in France, Mitterrand was the first Socialist leader elected president after more than thirty years of right-wing administration.<sup>5</sup> Even if this election nourished the hope of an improved economy, being forced into political cohabitation with the opposition promptly weakened Mitterrand's government. Moreover, this period witnessed the decline of the PCF (the French Communist Party), which had been resilient in France since its creation in the 1920s.

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<sup>4</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), 23-35.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on modern French political history during the Fifth Republic (1958 to today), see Serge Bernstein and Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Pompidou Years, 1969-1974* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Arnaud Jacquet and Christian Poncelet, *Les présidents de la Ve République. Valérie Giscard d'Estaing* (Paris, L'Archer, 1999); Julius W. Friend, *The Long Presidency: France in the Mitterrand Years 1981-1995* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998); Philip Malcolm Waller Thody, *The Fifth French Republic: Presidents, Politics, and Personalities* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Thus, the 1980s saw a general climate of dissatisfaction and discouragement with politics at a moment of massive unemployment and uncertainties regarding the country's economic future. Tellingly, this was also the period when more intricate and anti-demagogical models of political engagement developed in art, inspired by semiology and post-Marxism, which had a significant impact on the visual arts in France. Particularly significant were "Les nouveaux philosophes", a movement of disenchanted intellectuals and philosophers, first grouped together in 1976, and best represented by Bernard-Henri Lévy; it was characterized by a radical anti-Marxism that followed the "discovery" of the Russian Gulags.<sup>6</sup> Delivered from the need to convey a political message, video-based works of the 1980s increasingly pointed toward a set-up that enhanced, physically or mentally, the viewers' experience with the work by creating an active relationship with the screen. More recently, this tendency has led to a critical awareness of the viewer's own position as a participant or extra, both of the work of art and/or of the society at large.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to ask to what extent connections exist between specific models of spectatorship in relation to the screen and various modes of political engagement that developed in France? In this study the term politics is used in its most literal and abstract sense to refer not only to the binary of left-right (the basic positions of political orientation), but also to the expression of cultural dynamics formulated as cultural politics, as well as to refer to artists

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<sup>6</sup> See Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Barbarism with a Human Face* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), originally published in French in 1977. For additional information on Les nouveaux philosophes and their central position in French intellectual media in the late 1970s, particularly television, see Kristin Ross, "Philosophers and Television," *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 169-81.

who, even if they do not target a political subject matter in their work, use it to formulate an individual or collective dissatisfaction or claim.

This impetus for this project stemmed from my interest in contemporary art and, more specifically, from my familiarity with the European art scene of the 1990s. This knowledge was gained through professional commitments with the contemporary art center Le Consortium and the art publisher Les presses du réel, both based in Dijon and influential on the promotion of “Relational Aesthetics”, a concept formulated by French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud during the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Originally published in French in 1998 as *Esthétique relationnelle*, the book is an anthology of texts first published as early as 1995 in the magazine *Documents sur l’art*. Bourriaud founded the latter in 1992, in collaboration with critic and curator Eric Troncy, and artists Philippe Parreno and Liam Gillick. Le Consortium presented solo exhibitions by artists associated with Relational Aesthetics: Philippe Parreno (1995), Rirkrit Tiravanija (1996), Angela Bulloch (1997), Maurizio Cattelan (1997), Liam Gillick (1997), Pierre Huyghe (1997), Pierre Joseph (1998), and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster (2001). The institution’s co-director Eric Troncy also curated a series of collective exhibitions with these same artists (*Surface de Réparation* in 1994, *Moral Maze* and *Le Labyrinthe Moral*, all in 1995). Three French artists involved with Relational Aesthetics – Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe, Joseph, and Parreno – will be discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation.

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<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

The critical response to Relational Aesthetics in the United Kingdom and in the United States in the early 2000s, which contrasted with its positive reception in France, has also prompted my current interest in this topic. Led by Claire Bishop, this criticism targeted the gap between Bourriaud's declared intentions for this work and the actual experience of audiences.<sup>8</sup> The opposition Bishop/Bourriaud was instrumental at launching these discussions, and their respective misunderstandings have inspired this current research. Bishop called into question the artists' lack of socio-political engagement, which contradicted Bourriaud's claim that Relational Aesthetics expressed a renewed consciousness for the social and a new aesthetic for the visual arts, which considers sociability, human relationships and the practice of inter-subjectivity as an aesthetic object.<sup>9</sup> Bishop's critique rightly brought attention to the valorization of conviviality and participation in Relational Aesthetics, as well as questioning their formulation of a socio-political position. Overall, such ideas were a challenging but necessary consideration in a French context, within which the conception that "everything is political" has been too often, and for too long, taken for granted.

Despite their rarity in France, recent publications on the relationship between contemporary art and politics do exist.<sup>10</sup> Paul Ardenne's *Un art contextuel* is one of the few attempts to group Art sociologique and socio-critique, developed in France in the 1970s, with

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<sup>8</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79.

<sup>9</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Pleasance and Woods (2002), 46.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ardenne's *Un art contextuel: création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002) and Dominique Baqué's *Pour un nouvel art politique. De l'art contemporain au documentaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

more recent and better known international art practices (ie. Group Material, Simon Starling, Gillian Wearing). Their works all take the form of public interventions in the immediate urban context, as opposed to museum institutions or the art market. According to Ardenne, these works are political because they create a direct relationship with their “concrete universe” and also because they experiment with models of viewer participation opposed to passive spectatorship. By contrast, Dominique Baqué’s *Pour un nouvel art politique* evaluates contemporary art’s humanist desire to elevate public consciousness as naïve and idealistic, and calls into question the assumption that contemporary art is commonly political. By contrast, she claims that true political engagement has been more convincingly developed by visual artists (such as Allan Sekula, Gilles Saussier, Raymond Depardon or Chantal Akerman) using photographic or cinematographic documentary. Baqué identifies documentary practices as more efficient for socio-economic cultural and political criticism because of their direct approach to everyday life, as well as their discursive and informational content.

These debates open up to further research into the historical relationship between art and politics and suggest that, in the late twentieth century, what constituted an informed socio-political art practice might be conceived and/or received differently within distinctive socio-politico and cultural frameworks. Consider the opposed reception of Guy Debord and the Situationist International in French and US contexts. In his article “A Reflexion on the French and American Perception of Guy Debord,” Michael Stone-Richards argues that Debord’s œuvre is seen as a political statement by charismatic militant figure in the United States, whereas in France he is considered more significant as a stylist of language, known for the moralistic and

pessimistic dimension of his ideas.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, this dissertation argues that French and US frameworks show contrasting patterns in the dynamic relating art to politics. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, when in general in the United States, visual artists and critics, exhausted with Formalism and inspired by Marxism, reacted dominantly in developing an increasingly socio-politically engaged artistic production and theory. To some extent this politicization of US art also resulted from a misreading of French theory by a new generation of art critics, emerging in the late 1970s, who interpreted post-structuralism as “overtly critical”, as François Cusset has argued.<sup>12</sup> However, in France, where Clement Greenberg’s theory of modernism was absent from artistic discourse until at least the late 1980s, Existentialism and post-Marxist rhetoric dominated.<sup>13</sup> For example, Catherine Dossin demonstrates that Pollock was interpreted, in France in the 1950s, in relation to Art Informel and Art Autre, and through Existentialist ideas promoted by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>14</sup> In the visual arts in general this corresponded to a period of apparent depolitization, when a less confrontational attitude toward politics was adopted.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Stone-Richards, “A Reflexion on the French and American Perception of Guy Debord,” in *Parachute*, no. 93 (1999): 56-8.

<sup>12</sup> See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> The earliest, and isolated, Clement Greenberg’s text translated into French was “Les textes sur Pollock – peinture à l’américaine,” *Macula* 2, (1977).

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Dossin, “Without Greenberg: The Post-War Reception of Abstract Expressionism in France”, paper presented at SECAC (South Eastern College Art Conference), in Savannah (GA), 2011, in the session “With or Without Greenberg: Beyond Anglophone Art History” (co-chairs: the author and Raffaele Bredarida).

## Literature Review

The extant literature on video-based art produced in France is rare, and when it exists, is often only accessible in French. At the same time, video as a medium is all but absent from the major survey books on French art.<sup>15</sup> For instance, video is absent from two seminal books on French art: Catherine Millet, *L'Art contemporain en France* and from *Premises*, the catalogue of the survey exhibition on French art, at the The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in 1998. In the exhibition only a few videos from the 1990s were presented in a “Film section”, and does not acknowledge or refer to the history of French video from the 1970s and 80s. Thus, the literature discussed below lays the foundations for the present study while also indicating other limitations that this dissertation intends to surmount.

With the exception of Anne-Marie Duguet's *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, published in 1981, unfortunately only published in French and out of print for years, French video from the late 1960s and 70s is still largely an unwritten history. Duguet's book remains the most comprehensive account of early video production in France.<sup>16</sup> A specialist in aesthetics and the sociology of art, Duguet is one of the few scholars to acknowledge the contribution of women's collectives and Fred Forest with Art sociologique to the history of early video. Indeed, she

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Millet, *L'Art contemporain en France* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), translated by Charles Penwarden as *Contemporary Art in France* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006) and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Denis Hollier, and Anthony Vidler, *Premises. Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, & Design from France: 1958-1998* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Anne-Marie Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing* (Paris: Hachette, 1981).

outlines a large diversity of practices associated with early video in France, including educational and community uses; however, in the literature after 1981, these radical origins were rapidly disregarded. Another noteworthy source of information is the video maker and historian Jean-Paul Fargier. In the 1970s, Fargier collaborated with Danielle Jaeggi, Martine Barrar, and Annie Caro in a collective called Les Cent Fleurs, named in reference to Mao Tse-Tung, and often best identified as Art écologique. They developed videos addressing worker's rights and feminism, as well as environmental issues, including nuclear development in France. Fargier was also involved in the promotion and distribution of independent video in France in the 1970s; when he collaborated with the association Mon Œil, a distribution collective founded in 1974.<sup>17</sup> Grouping together the collectives Video Out, Les Cent Fleurs, Vidéo 00, Vidéa and Les Insoumuses, Mon Œil was managed by retired scholar Marcel Moiroud. In fact, Fargier's major contribution has been to write on the distribution of independent video production in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, rather than using a specific methodology or theory, both Duguet and Fargier's contribution are testimonies, the word of the witness, since they were both involved in the early history of video. However, because militant practices and Art sociologique were

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on Mon Œil see Monique and Guy Hennebelle, "Problèmes et perspectives de la vidéo militante: Table ronde avec le collectif Mon Œil, Video Out, Vidéo 00, Les Cent Fleurs," *Ecran 41* (November 1975): 35-50 and Marcel Moiroud, "Vidéos des années 80, vers une nouvelle donne? 'Mon Œil' et ses problèmes." *Film Action*, no. 1 (December 1981): 106-9.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Jean-Paul Fargier, "Histoire de la vidéo française. Structures et forces vives (1992)," in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, ed. Nathalie Magnan (Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1997), 49-60. Fargier is a regular contributor to *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* on topics addressing video.

overlooked in France during the institutionalization of video in the 1980s, these are barely mentioned in later literature and remain, even today, badly known and documented.

To date, the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris is the best and almost only place to access and view militant video by women collectives. However, because of the Centre's focus on audio-visual material, it does not contain large documentary archives to support research into their video collections.<sup>19</sup> There is nevertheless an upcoming scholarship that intends to fill this gap, such as H el ene Fleckinger's forthcoming dissertation on French feminist films, which also considers video.<sup>20</sup> As for *Art sociologique*, there are several publications

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<sup>19</sup> The Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, in Paris, was founded in 1982 by members of the collective Les Insoumuses (Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, and Ioana Wieder) with funds from the new Socialist government, following Mitterand's election in 1981. The Centre is open to the public by appointment and its video catalogue is available on its website. Centre Simone de Beauvoir, <http://www.centre-simone-de-beauvoir.com/> (accessed September 11, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> H el ene Fleckinger is a cinema historian currently working on her PhD dissertation on French feminist film and video production. She has published couple of articles and interviews specifically on women's early video: "I Own my Body as well as My Images. Video at the Service of the Feminist Cause," *Trieste International Documentary Film Festival* (Trieste: NODO, 2009), 52-4. H el ene Fleckinger, "Entretiens avec Carole Roussopoulos," *Nouvelles questions f eministes* 28, no. 1 (2009): 98-118. This is the last interview given by Carole Roussopoulos before she died in Switzerland, on October 22, 2009. Fleckinger is now in charge of the Association Carole Roussopoulos. Association Carole Roussopoulos, <http://www.carole-roussopoulos.com/> (accessed April 26, 2011). Unfortunately, however, she has been totally uncooperative when I contacted her in relation to this research. My own work adds to the literature on women's early video: "Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's collectives" was published in *Afterall*, no. 27, (Summer 2011): 5-16. This essay makes rare material available to an Anglophone readership, and is permanently accessible through the Afterall website, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.27/disobedient-video-in-france-in-the-1970s-video-production-by-women-s-collectives> (accessed August 28, 2011). Proof in a new generation's interest in this material was the reply to my article by Corinna Kirsch, "Letter to the Editor: 'Expensive, Bureaucratic, and Masculine Video,' a response to 'Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's Collectives,'" also available on Afterall

available that document the work of Forest, as well as the activities of the Collectif d'art sociologique, which he co-founded with Hervé Fischer and Jean-Paul Thenot, and which was active from 1974 to 1981. However, most of these publications are only available in French and produced by the artists themselves, so they are promotional and unselfcritical.<sup>21</sup> Since the start of his career, Fred Forest has been committed to documenting and communicating his own work. However, until recently, the almost exclusive location for archival and for audio-visual material on Forest's work was his extensive website, the Web Net Museum, which the artist founded, copyrighted, and launched in 1991.<sup>22</sup> The Web Net Museum compiles information on Forest – his biography, the description of his artistic actions, his bibliography, videography, links to audio-conferences, etc and makes available most of the literature produced on Forest's work, or on the Collectif d'art sociologique. On its homepage, the mission statement explains its commitment to creating a dynamic and alternative museum that contrasts with traditional institutions for the arts. Notably, Forest's work is not part of the collection of the Département Nouveaux Médias at the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, nor it is part of the collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The Centre

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online, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.27/letter-to-the-editor-disobedient-video> (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> The most significant publications on Art sociologique are edited by the artists themselves: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thenot, *Collectif d'art sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique* (Paris: Musée Galliera, 1975); Hervé Fischer, *Théorie de l'Art sociologique* (Tournai: Caterman, 1977); Fred Forest, ed., *Art sociologique. Vidéo* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977); and Fred Forest, ed., *100 actions* (Nice: Z'édicions, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> The Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org> (accessed June 27, 2010), is the artist's website, also open to submission by other artists. It is in French with sections in English and Portuguese.

Pompidou has refused Forest's donation of his archives, which occupy an ambiguous status between documentation and artwork. It should be mentioned that the donation was contingent upon a large quantity of emergency digitalization in order to save the content of the videotapes. Ironically, but significantly considering the artist's interest in the mass media, Forest's archives entered the INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, located at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris) in 2009, whose chief function is to collect and catalogue the archives for French public radio and television since their creation. Anecdotally, the archivist staff of INA describe Forest's audio-visual funds as "different, strange, provocative, and intriguing" in comparison to the material from public radio and television that they usually deal with on an everyday basis<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that Forest's archives are nevertheless still raw material; they have been catalogued but remain barely sorted, and are repetitive and often confusing. This exacerbates also the poor state of conservation of most of the audio-visual material, which results from the various technical and maintenance issues now affecting early video. The conservation of early video production is a recurrent problem; videotape is an unstable medium, which necessitates the digitalization of what remains available. Digitalization for preservation is the primary activity, and consumes a large part of the budget, of most institutions working with video. Forest's audio-visual archives often suffer from poor sound and/or image quality, which resulted from technical problems during the recording itself. Having been digitalized by INA, Forest audio-visual production is now stable. Also, despite the apparent quantity of literature available on Forest's work, there is actually relatively little of use for art historians. This is

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<sup>23</sup> Source: conversation with the archivist of the Inathèque, July 2009).

further complicated by the fact that most of the texts on his work are by philosophers, sociologists and/or theoreticians who are unfamiliar with art and the art historical context for his work. A perfect example of this type of publication is Blaise Galland, *Art sociologique: Méthode pour une sociologie esthétique* (1987). Galland is a Swiss sociologist and anthropologist who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Art sociologique, which he then turned into this book. Galland makes only few references to artistic practices other than Art sociologique, and they are limited to Marcel Duchamp and Dada. In this book, Galland uses Art sociologique to reconsider the status of sociology at the time of the crisis of scientific knowledge, from it he deduces an innovative approach to sociology that he formulates as “method for artistic sociology” or “sociology aesthetics”.<sup>24</sup> The notable exceptions are by art critic Pierre Restany (1930-2003), who was affiliated with Nouveau Réalisme in the 1960s but in the 1970s became an early and loyal supporter of Forest, and art historian Isabelle Lassignardie. Lassignardie compiles Forest’s catalogue raisonné for her doctoral dissertation in Art History. This is an impressive study in five volumes, and constitutes the only catalogue raisonné of Forest’s work.<sup>25</sup> In addition, two forthcoming studies by young US scholars will also help to construct a missing art historical narrative for Forest’s work, and suggests that a stronger interest in Art sociologique exists

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<sup>24</sup> Blaise Galland, *Art sociologique: Méthode pour une sociologie esthétique* (Genève: Georg Editeur, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Isabelle Lassignardie, “Fred Forest: Catalogue Raisonné (1963-2008)” (PhD diss., Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, 2010). It is accessible through TEL (these-en-ligne), [http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00515232\\_v1/](http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00515232_v1/) (accessed October 31, 2010). The first volume compiles commentaries, then are four volumes dedicated to the artistic work: Volume 1: Works from 1963-76, Volume 2: Works 1977-87, Volume 3: Works from 1988-2008, and Volume 4: Annexes.

outside of France, particularly in the United States, while it continues to be marginalized in the country of its origin.<sup>26</sup>

In France, the institutionalization of video art began in the late 1970s, and so the literature on video-based art available in French is almost non-existent prior to the early 1980s. An exception is *Vidéo art: défi et paradoxes* (1974), a self-published book by Swiss philosopher and art historian René Berger (1915-2009), whose writings were known in French video circles. Berger was an early specialist of video, television, and communication; he was also director of the Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts in Lausanne, from 1962 to 1981.<sup>27</sup> His book expresses his enthusiasm for independent and artistic video production, which he saw as a chance to counter the monopoly of commercial television. At the beginning of the 1980s, there was an unprecedented profusion of publications on video, supporting the institutionalisation of Video Art: publications by Dany Bloch, Dominique Belloir, and Anne-Marie Duguet, which are mentioned below, and analyzed in Chapter Three of this dissertation. These writings nevertheless produce a more restrictive concept of video than the abovementioned arguments by Duguet and Fargier. Instead of expanding video art to encompass a wide diversity of approaches, institutions

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<sup>26</sup> Lily Woodruff, "Disordering the Establishment: Art, Display, and Participation in France, 1958-1978" (PhD diss., Northwestern University and Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2012). This dissertation includes a chapter on Forest and his involvement with the Collectif d'art sociologique (1974-84). Ruth Erickson, "Assembling Social Forms: The Collectif d'art sociologique (Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thenot) in post-1968 France" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, expected completion 2014). This dissertation reconsiders the relationship between art, society and sociology, and identifies new forms created by artists to articulate and nurture these relations; including not only collective projects but also other social forms, such as the interview, performative lecture, and workshop.

<sup>27</sup> René Berger, *Art vidéo: défis et paradoxes* (Lausanne: René Berger, 1974).

sought to reduce the remit of video so that it would fit an emerging notion of Video Art as a new medium in the visual arts. Dany Bloch's work on video in the early 1980s exemplifies this limited remit, and helped to produce a working definition of Video Art as a self-referential, medium-specific, formalist and theoretical.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, 1970s militant video and Art sociologique was focused on subjects external to video itself, and privileged this content over formal concerns. Bloch's models were broadly inspired by the example of North American video history (Nam June Paik, Peter Campus, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci), and helped to construct an international history for the new medium. Additionally, texts by the video maker and critic Dominique Belloir reinforced a medium-based approach, by focusing on video techniques and/or technology. Belloir documents, for instance, the passage from analog to digital video technology, which occurred in the 1980s, and uses this to explain the recurrent emphasis on technical and formal experimentation with the medium in that decade.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Dany Bloch (1925-91) was an art and video historian. From assisting Suzanne Pagé on the first exhibition of video art, at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, in 1974, she then developed her research into video in the early 1980s. Bloch completed a Doctoral Dissertation, entitled "Art vidéo, 1965-1980", defended in 1981, at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. Based on her dissertation, the following year, she published *Art et vidéo, 1960-1980/82* (Locarno: Edizioni Flaviana, 1982). However this work became better known as a contribution for *L'Art vidéo 1980-1999*, ed. Vittorio Fagone (Paris: Limage 2/Alin Avila, 1983), 87-183. This also shows that many opportunities opened, in the early 1980s, to publish scholarly work on the theme of video.

<sup>29</sup> Dominique Belloir, "La vision machine," *Autrement*, no. 48 (1983): 257-9. Belloir also completed a Doctoral dissertation on video for a degree in Aesthetics, Dominique Belloir "Dispositif vidéo, médium créatif" (PhD diss., University Paris 8, 1978). It was published as *Vidéo art exploration* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1981). See also Anne-Marie Duguet, *Déjouer l'image* (Paris: Jacqueline Chambon editions, 2002), which focuses on electronic and digital artistic production.

Institutions have been central to the literature on Video Art, especially the catalogues published by the Centre Pompidou, specifically by its precursor Département Nouveaux Médias. When the Centre Pompidou first opened to the public in 1977, video was associated with the Film and Photography department, run by Alain Sayag (a photography specialist).<sup>30</sup> In early 1980, Christine Van Assche succeeded Sayag and started the Département Nouveaux Médias, a pioneer in France (and Europe more widely) for its focus on video-based art. Van Assche played a major role in the institutionalization of video in France, making acquisitions for the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, housed at the Centre Georges Pompidou, and publishing two catalogues of video-based art.<sup>31</sup> The integration of the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre George Pompidou in Paris, as well as of its collections, was decided in 1976, before the Centre opened in 1977. The Département Nouveaux Médias now has a Videothèque in the galleries of the permanent collection at the Centre Pompidou, where visitors can have access to the video collections via computer monitors.

Also, in the 1980s, video festivals bloomed in France as video became more widely spread among artists. The *Manifestation Internationale de vidéo de Montbéliard*, which started in 1982, was one of the first and most respected video festivals. However, its catalogues present very little of interest for our purposes; they comprise extensive programs for the festival's

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<sup>30</sup> See Philippe Gerrier, Michel Royer, and Jean-Paul Simon, "2x3 mètres à penser les institutions: Interview Alain Sayag et Dany Bloch," *Vidéoglyphes 2* (Summer 1979): 7-40.

<sup>31</sup> Two catalogues were published on the video and new media collection: Christine Van Assche, ed., *Vidéo et après* (Paris: Editions Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992); and *Collection Nouveaux Médias. Installations* (Paris: Editions Centre Georges Pompidou, 2006).

audience, listing the videos screened, accompanied by literal, uninspiring descriptions; there are no explanatory or interpretative essays. Throughout the 1980s, the type of video production recognized by institutions as Video Art is increasingly well-documented and monographic publications began to be produced on individual video artists, such as Thierry Kuntzel and Robert Cahen (both discussed in Chapter Three). Nevertheless, despite the respectable quantity of sources documenting the institutionalization of video in France, this material has yet to be analyzed critically.

Today, meanwhile, video receives more attention in the visual arts than ever: it is frequently the focus of magazine articles, exhibitions, catalogues and anthologies, and acquired for private and public collections. The most recent literature on Video Art published in France are survey books that, like Bloch's *Art et vidéo, 1960-1980/82* and most writings from the 1980s, continue to construct an international history of video, and include only very few French artists prior to the 1990s. Françoise Parfait's *Vidéo: un art contemporain* (2001) is typical in this regard: she develops an international history of video that focuses on canonical videographers in the US such as Paik, Graham and Acconci, and disregards early French video production.<sup>32</sup> Another recent publication worth mentioning is Nathalie Magnan, ed., *La vidéo entre art et communication* (1997), which compiles primary sources composing an international history of video and provides French translations of major American texts on video (written by Martha Rosler or Vito Acconci, to mention a few). Obviously, there is no French equivalent of books

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<sup>32</sup> Françoise Parfait, *Vidéo: un art contemporain* (Paris: Editions du Regard, 2001). Nathalie Magnan, ed., *La vidéo entre art et communication* (Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1997).

such as Chrissie Iles's exhibition catalogue *Into the Light: the Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* (2001) or David Curtis's *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (2007), both of which elucidate the history of a national artistic production.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, Grégoire Quenault's doctoral dissertation, *Reconsidération de l'histoire de l'art vidéo à partir de ses débuts méconnus en France entre 1957 et 1974* ("Reconstruction of the History of Video Art from its Misrecognized Beginnings in France Between 1957 and 1974"), reconstructs a little known fragment of the French history of video by describing an early phase of experimentation with the medium that took place in the framework of French television.<sup>34</sup> Quenault explains that, as early as 1957, pioneer work involving audio-visual technology took place at the RTF (French Radiodiffusion and Television), later known as ORTF, especially at the Service de la Recherche, which operated under the tutelage of the French Ministry of Information.<sup>35</sup> The RTF (1949 to 1964) and ORTF (1964 to 1974) were public offices in charge of producing and programming for French radio and television. It is in this context that the Service de la Recherche was created in 1960. In 1964, with the creation of the second channel, several productions emanating from the Service de la Recherche were broadcast

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<sup>33</sup> Chrissie Iles, *Into the Light: the Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001); David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (London: British Film Institute, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Grégoire Quenault, "Reconsidération de l'histoire de l'art vidéo à partir de ses débuts méconnus en France entre 1957 et 1974" (PhD diss. Université Paris 8, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 322-3. For more information on the Service de la Recherche see also Denis Maréchal, "Le Service de la Recherche," in *La grande aventure du petit écran: la télévision française 1935-1975*, ed. Jérôme Bourdon, et al. (Paris: Musée d'Histoire Contemporaine, 1997), 164-5.

on French television, in *Banc d'essai*. At its inception and until its cessation in 1974, musicologist and acoustician Pierre Schaeffer, who was known since the late 1940s for his contribution to *Musique Concrète*, directed the Service de la Recherche.<sup>36</sup> The Service was composed of four distinctive research groups: music, technology, critical studies and image; the last of these, the Groupe de Recherche sur l'Image (GRI), in which most of the visual experimentations took place, was created in 1968. The Service employed musicians, filmmakers, scientists, philosophers, engineers and audio-visual technicians, who tested images in the form of visual effects, graphic animations, abstract images, video clips (associating music and image), as well as with the use of electronic technology and colored images.<sup>37</sup> From 1960 to 1974, some of the major names working for or at the Service de la Recherche included Jean-François Lyotard, Robert Cahen, Dominique Belloir, Martial Raysse, Raymond Hains, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Jean-Christophe Averty, Peter Foldès, Pierre Henry, and Nicolas Schöffer. Some of them developed an independent production in the late 1970s and 1980s, after the Service de la Recherche was closed, as discussed in the Chapter Three of this dissertation. In the framework of ORTF various technologies were created such as Marcel Dupouy's synthesizer that allowed the colorization of images, in 1973. The GRI started exploiting video in 1966, when it opened a fully equipped video studio. As Quenault points out, the GRI is rarely acknowledged in the French history of video (with the exception of Duguet and Fargier), which in general never considers work developed in and for television to be Video Art. Quenault's goal is to assert the

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<sup>36</sup> For more information on Pierre Schaeffer see Jocelyne Tournet, *Coup d'œil sur l'œuvre de Pierre Schaeffer* (Paris: INA-Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> See Quenault, "Reconsidération de l'histoire de l'art vidéo," 402.

significance of this production in comparison to international artistic creation in the 1960s, and to prove that it can compete with a canonical history of video art that focuses on Nam June Paik and his followers in the United States and in Germany. Quenault's study is also significant for his analysis of the relationship between video and television in France that, unlike the United States, took place in the institutional context of a state funded and controlled public television. This situation obviously differs from the more independent production described by John Albert Walker in *Arts TV: a History of Arts Television in Britain* (1993) and by David Joselit in *Feedback. Television Against Democracy* (2007), which represent the two main studies on video using television, focusing respectively on the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>38</sup>

The literature on spectatorship and reception theory is extensive in relation to cinema, but needs to be enlarged in order to engage with time-based visual arts and their development into installation and the projected image. A recent attempt to typologize spectatorship in contemporary video installation has been offered by Ursula Frohne, who discusses different approaches to viewer participation – from physical immersion to mental spaces for imaginary projection.<sup>39</sup> Frohne does not discuss French art, yet she provides the basis of a method for thinking the screen as an interface. Other attempts to define the screen as interface can be found

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<sup>38</sup> John Albert Walker, *Arts TV: a History of Arts Television in Britain* (London: J. Libbey, 1993); David Joselit, *Feedback. Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Ursula Frohne, “‘That’s the Only Now I Get.’ Immersion and Participation in Video Installations by Dan Graham, Steve McQueen, Douglas Gordon, Doug Aitken, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Sam Taylor-Wood (2004),” *Medien Kunst Net*, [http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/art\\_and\\_cinematography/immersion\\_participation/print/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/art_and_cinematography/immersion_participation/print/) (accessed October 26, 2008).

in recent literature. Oliver Grau's *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion* (2003) compiles examples of various immersive experiences, developed through history from panorama to virtual reality, and explains how they respectively use illusion and virtuality.<sup>40</sup> Stéphanie Katz's *L'écran, de l'icône au virtuel*. (2004) reconstructs a genealogy of the screen from the Byzantine period to today, and addresses questions of immersion involving the screen. Kate Mondloch's *Screens*. (2010) focuses on spectatorship and the screen, as well as screen-reliant installation art, and discusses the ambiguous status of the screen as material and immaterial, as well as its relationship with the viewer's body, and notion of space and time.

However, the larger theoretical framework by which to consider the evolving relationship between the viewer and the screen is inevitably drawn from French semiology, post-structuralism and film studies. Guy Debord, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Raymond Bellour and Jacques Rancière have all provided invaluable contributions to theories of spectatorship.<sup>41</sup> This literature also includes numerous

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<sup>40</sup> Oliver Grau's *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003); Stéphanie Katz's *L'écran, de l'icône au virtuel. La résistance de l'infigurable* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004); Kate Mondloch's *Screens. Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> See for example Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967). Translated by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak as *Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970); Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives (1966)" and "The Death of the Author (1968)," in *Image, Music, and Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farras, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 79-124 and 142-8; Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), originally published as *Simulacres et simulations* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981); Gilles Deleuze, *L'Image-temps* (Paris: Edition de Minuit, 1985); Raymond Bellour, "Le spectateur

discussions about the notion of participation in contemporary art, which have been reactivated since the early 2000s with the international reception of Relational Aesthetics. The present dissertation therefore intends to construct a historical narrative that does not yet exist in French or Anglophone art history for French video-based production and its politics of spectatorship from the late 1960s to the present day.

### **Methodology and Content**

This study of video-based art produced in France focuses on examples representative of key moments in the history of the medium. It is organized as a chronological analysis that combines the disciplines of art history, film theory, cultural history and new media studies. The aim is to produce a methodology that permits a more nuanced study of contemporary art practices associated with video, and a better understanding of the politics of different modes of spectatorship formed in relationship to the screen. Video is still a relatively recent technology and medium for the visual arts and as such is still generally not well known or studied by art historians. It also presents a set of particularities that are often challenging to traditional methods of visual analysis, such as technical considerations, the need to analyze images in motion rather than fixed, as well as the physical use of the screen and its installation in relationship to an audience. Obviously, the history of technology is crucial to this research, since video's artistic development depends so much on the technological evolution of the camera, projection

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pensif," *L'Entre-images: photo, cinéma, vidéo* (Paris: La différence, 1990), 77-9; Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique Editions, 2008).

equipment and various types of screen. In France, due to problems of format compatibility and complaints about the amateur quality of productions, independent video was banned from public television and movie theaters. This contrasts with the more positive reception of independent production in the United Kingdom and in the United States. Even today, the earliest videos produced in France in the 1970s, are difficult to locate and almost impossible to view. They are often found in an alternative network of institutions, formed as independent associations, situated by words of mouth during meetings and interviews with protagonists of the history of French video. This network of institutions includes the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Light Cone, and CJC (Collectif Jeune Cinéma), all visited during my research. The last two are organizations promoting and distributing video in the affiliated field of experimental cinema, with which video was often associated in its early days, before it found its place within visual art.

Mostly inspired by the social history of art and visual studies, this dissertation also intends to equip the reader with a better understanding of the evolution of video in relation to changes in socio-economical and political contexts. In this regard, French institutional history and cultural policy are central to this research; they are too often disregarded in the analysis of French art, despite the government's well-known support of the arts, which is often more developed than in many other countries. However, state funding in France by no means benefits the entire population of artists, but results from conscious institutional choices as well as from political decisions that can and should be scrutinized.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> On French institutional history and cultural policy, see Jean Caune, *La culture en action. De Vilar à Lang: le sens perdu* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1992); Bernard

Beyond social history of art and visual studies, each chapter adopts a different approach that corresponds to the nature of its content. Chapter One, “Disobedient Video: Militant Production by Women’s Collectives (1970-81)”, use feminism and gender studies to present the main themes of the first generation of French video makers, working in anti-authoritarian collectives, primarily composed of women. Collectives such as Video Out, Les Insoumuses and Vidéa, were associated with the emergence of the feminist movement in France, and active in the intricate socio-political context of post-May 68. These groups sought to use video to give a voice to under-represented groups and for creating a sense of solidarity among women. Despite adopting an anti-institutional position and not identifying themselves as artists, these collectives are fully representative of the first generation to appropriate video, and defined its first independent usage. By contrast, Chapter Two, “Fred Forest: Early Works. New Media Explorations and Art Sociologique (1967-75)”, uses a monographic and chronological approach to study the early multi-media production of this self-taught and self-proclaimed visual artist. Forest independently developed a wide diversity of applications for video, deploying feedback and viewer participation through recordings, television and closed-circuit video installation. Forest became a key figure in Art sociologique, an important direction in French art of the 1970s, through his participation in the Collectif d’art sociologique. Chapter Three, “Institutionalizing Video and Screen-Based Art (1974-85)”, develops a method inspired by institutional critique.

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Piniau and Ramon Tio Bellido. *L’action artistique de la France dans le monde*. Paris. L’Harmattan/AFAA, 1998. Philippe Poirrier, *L’Etat de la culture en France au XXe siècle* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2000); Philippe Poirrier, *Les enjeux de l’histoire culturelle* (Paris: Seuil, 2004); Jean-Michel Djian, *Politique culturelle: la fin d’un mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). And for an account in English see Jeremy Ahearne, *French Cultural Policy Debates. A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Using cultural policy, exhibition and institutional histories, as well as the literature produced on video in the 1980s, this chapter reconstructs the moment when video was first accepted as a new medium for the visual arts. It also exposes the choices made by institutions to set a definition for Video Art, and to construct representative national collections. This chapter also presents a selection of examples of video and screen-based art characteristics of the 1980s, with a focus on their contribution to video history as well as to their approach to spectatorship; this includes the work of Robert Cahen and Thierry Kuntzel, and *Les Immatériaux*, an exhibition organized by Jean-François Lyotard at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1985. The contribution of *Les Immatériaux* to video history, and Lyotard's approach to spectatorship, has been understudied and sidelined in favor of the show's role in exhibition history, the relationship between art and philosophy, or Lyotard's visual formulation of postmodernism. Chapter Four "Beyond the Spectacle: Fictionalized Reality and the Spectator's Consciousness (1990s to the Present)" develops a critical approach to contemporary art by studying more recent art focusing on television, video, installation and the projected image in France since the 1990s. This chapter considers work by Matthieu Laurette, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, all of whom became internationally known in the 1990s; all four were born in the 1960s, and grew up with television. I discuss these artists in the context of Relational Aesthetics, their interest in addressing the spectator in exhibitions and installations, and their desire to foreground the viewer's consciousness of being a spectator.

This study of the evolution of the relationship between the viewer and the screen, within the history of video-based art from the late 1960s to the present day, is far from exhaustive.

Instead, it results from a deliberate selection that leaves untouched other significant practices occurring at the same time, in fields contingent to the visual arts, but which did not directly affect the productions studied in this dissertation, for example 1970s community-based projects and socio-cultural animation in an educational framework are not covered by the present research. Nor is the work of well-known filmmakers, such as Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker (1921-2012), who temporarily used video in their careers as early as 1968. The same year, with Alain Jacquier, they created video-tracts that were distributed as a video magazine – known as *Vidéo 5* – which was available at François Maspero’s bookstore “La joie de lire” in the Latin Quarter, in Paris. Godard focused on working with video principally between 1973 and 1983, when he moved to Grenoble and started collaborating with Anne-Marie Miéville in the framework of the *Sonimage* (sound and image) workshop.<sup>43</sup> Their videos were often commissioned by television, but in fact rarely broadcast in this framework. A significant example of this is *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants*, created in 1977 for FR3 (the third channel of French television), but which was ultimately censored for as inappropriate for television. A representative number of productions by Godard and Marker are now part of the Collections of the Musée National d’Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Likewise, this study does not touch on French visual artists using cinema and experimenting with 16-mm film format, such as Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Christian Boltanski, Gérard Fromanger, Paul-Armand Gette, Jean Le Gac, Jacques Monory or Martial Raysse.

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<sup>43</sup> For more information on Godard’s video production, see Wheeler Winston Dixon, “Anne-Marie Miéville and the *Sonimage* workshop,” in *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 129-76.

Because of my focus on independent video practice, this research does not present further developments with video produced in the framework of French television, such as the experiments of the Groupe de Recherche sur l'Image (GRI) at the ORTF.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, this study does not discuss the use of video in movements such as the Internationale Lettriste and Fluxus (Louis Cane, Jean Dupuy, Robert Filliou, Isidore Isou and Ben Vautier), nor with experimentation in related artistic fields such as dance, music, theater and performance (Françoise Janicot, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Michel Journiac, Gina Pane or Orlan). Finally, this dissertation does not address more recent developments involving the screens as interface that have arisen with Internet or Net art.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, it should be pointed out that I have often used French terms first, followed by English, even though the *Chicago Manual of Style* recommends simply dropping the original language in favor of an English formulation. However, Chicago Style also allows for exceptions depending on content and context. Because so many of the phrases I am using here – such as Art sociologique or Art écolologique – are not well known and not commonly used in English, I have maintained the French formulation. I have also maintained the French for artists collectives such as “Collectif d'art sociologique” (“Collective of Sociological Art”) and for the 1990s French concept of “Cinéma d'exposition” (which can be broadly translated as “Cinema of

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<sup>44</sup> See Quenault, “Reconsidération de l'histoire de l'art vidéo”; Anne-Marie Duguet, *Jean-Christophe Averty* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1991).

<sup>45</sup> See for example Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*; Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, *New Media Art* (London: Taschen, 2006).

Exhibition”), which refers to artists using strategies commonly found in cinema but unusual in visual art.

All in all, this study of the politics of spectatorship in French video-based art raises and attempts to answer the following questions: To what extent can the diversity of artistic practices, and audience positioning with the screen, be interpreted as a reflection of the socio-political contexts of their specific time? Do models of relationship between the viewer and the screen exist and attest to the socio-political engagement of the artists? How can the history of French video contribute to a better understanding of screen-based art in other geographical contexts, for example in the United Kingdom and in the United States, where the political swing from right to left in the post-68 period, moving to the right again in the 1980s, is the opposite of what took place in France?

## CHAPTER ONE

### **DISOBEDIENT VIDEO: MILITANT PRODUCTION**

#### **BY WOMEN'S COLLECTIVES (1970-81)**

The first portable video cameras became available in France in fall 1967. The Portapak by Sony was the first portable video recording system internationally available on the market. It consisted in a camera, a portable VCR to record, and a monitor to broadcast. However, unlike the United States, where video became available several years earlier (in 1965), and was quickly championed by artists such as Nam June Paik, Les Levine and Bruce Nauman, in France video did not immediately attract the attention of French artists as a possible means of expression and communication. It is actually not until the late 1970s that video started being used in France as a medium by visual artists. Conversely, as early as 1970 collectives mainly composed of women, whose members rarely identified themselves as artists, recognized the opportunities that video represented and began exploring the new medium. To qualify this generation of videographers, Jean-Paul Fargier coined the term “vidéaste” as a combination of “cinéaste” and “artist video”; it is a terminology still used today to describe those working with video. Fargier explains that, in France in the 1970s, there was no knowledge of the existence of “video artists”. He discovered this concept with Danielle Jaeggi, with whom he collaborated in the collective Les Cents Fleurs, while they travelled to New York and visited The Kitchen in the early 1970s. In New York there was no distinction between artistic and militant video, he argued, and he began to think that a

militant could be someone who creates a form of modern art.<sup>1</sup> In France, women created the majority of video productions in the 1970s, and represent the first generation there independently to appropriate video. This chapter aims to clarify this understudied moment in the history of video by answering the following questions: What alternatives did video offer in comparison to other audio-visual media, such as cinema and television? Why did video become a privileged medium for collectives, especially of women? To what extent did militant video empower its producers, subjects and/or viewers? And was video instrumental in the process of women's self-representation and/or in the construction of individual and collective identity?

Addressing the context in which an independent video production emerged in France in the early 1970s, videographer Jean-Paul Fargier recalls: "What all these people were doing with their Portapak was above all politics. Politics at large, 'everything is political' as we used to say. Video wants to be an art of living its time, being engaged in various combats (...). We were still close in time to May 68 and the utopian sap of this crazy spring still circulated almost everywhere."<sup>2</sup> In France, the development of video coincided with the emergence of the feminist movement. Video spread rapidly through women's organizations when a few individuals, either self-taught or trained at places like The Kitchen in New York, started organizing video

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Fargier, interview with Yaël Mandelbaum and Julien Marant, *Surpris par la nuit*, France Culture, September 19, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Fargier, "Histoire de la vidéo française," in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, 50. My translation.

workshops for other women.<sup>3</sup> Carole Roussopoulos (1945-2009) organized such training for women in Paris in 1975. Originally from Switzerland, where she studied literature, Roussopoulos moved to Paris in 1967 to study art history at La Sorbonne University. In fall 1969, she was the first woman to buy a video camera in France – the second person after Jean-Luc Godard (Fig. 1). Roussopoulos frequently recalled in interview that she was advised by writer and political activist Jean Genet to buy her first video camera. He recommended it to her as a revolutionary machine that would allow her to become a free and independent woman, working without a boss. She bought her camera with a three-months income check that she received after being laid-off from her job as an editor at *Vogue Magazine* in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Roussopoulos never completed her degree in art history but engaged with video production as early as 1970. Alone she signed or co-signed almost 50 videos in the 1970s, and more than 120 in her entire career. In 2007, the Cinémathèque Française in Paris honored her with a special screening night celebrating her exceptional career. As for Godard, besides his well known career in cinema, he started using video in 1968 and then more intensively between 1973 and 1983, in collaboration with Anne-Marie Miéville, in Grenoble. His production does not show any significant impact on militant video by women collectives. Carole Roussopoulos, for example, explained that she had very little knowledge of cinema, and was unfamiliar with both Godard and Marker's productions when she started using video.

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<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1971 by US video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka, The Kitchen started as an artist's collective, which was quickly turned into a non-profit organization providing support to artists working with new media, literature, and performing arts. The Kitchen was one of the first American institutions supporting the emergence of video as an artistic medium.

<sup>4</sup> Carole Roussopoulos, interview with Yaël Mandelbaum and Julien Marant, *Surpris par la nuit*.

Roussopoulos first practiced video with her husband Paul in 1970, when their friendship and collaboration with Jean Genet brought them to Algiers to teach video to political activists. In 1971, Roussopoulos joined the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (“Women’s Liberation Movement”) created six months earlier. In 1975, she met Ioana Wieder and the actress Delphine Seyrig (1932-90), who attended her “Introduction to Video” workshop that she started in her own apartment. Together, they founded the collective “Les femmes s’amusent”, sometimes also referred to as “Les muses s’amusent” (“The Women/Muses are playing”), and later accidentally renamed “Les Insoumuses”, and created some of the most significant feminist videos of the time. “Insoumuses” was a neologism combining “insoumise”, best translated as “disobedient”, with the word “muses”, the female personifications of artistic inspiration. It was during a group dinner, that Paul Roussopoulos mispronounced the name of the collective as “Les Insoumuses”.<sup>5</sup> Enjoying this slip of the tongue, the group members adopted the name. In fact, verbal wit, play words, and slogans were considered valuable forms of expression and communication in France, in the 1970s; they continued in a less detectable manner the graffiti and posters (notably by Ateliers Populaires de l’Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts) that covered the walls of Paris during May 68.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> On the topic see Yves Pagès, *Sorbonne 68: graffiti* (Paris: Verticales, 1998). Victoria H.F. Scott, “May 68 and the Question of the Image,” *Rutgers Art Review*, no. 24 (2008): 1-18. Corinne App, Anne-Marie Faure-Fraisse, Béatrice Fraenkel, and Lydie Rauzier, *Quarante ans de slogans féministes 1970-2010* (Paris: Editions iXe, 2011).

The appropriation of video by women was clearly a gesture of disobedience and emancipation. In her book *Vidéo. La mémoire au poing*, Anne-Marie Duguet recalls that in France during the 1970s, opportunities for women to embrace careers in technology were constrained by familial and social pressure.<sup>7</sup> However, there were many factors that attracted women's attention to video as they sought emancipation from living with restrictive social and gender boundaries. As Carole Roussopoulos explained, video was a new medium that was vacant; it was not yet formally taught, it had no history, and men had not yet appropriated it.<sup>8</sup> In addition, by contrast with other audio-visual equipment used in television and cinema, the first portable video cameras were relatively accessible commercially and were easier to operate. In the 1970s, Sony developed an advertising campaign that promoted a domestic use of audio-visual and televisual technologies, with posters showing people of all ages and genders. The Portapak was commonly associated with representations of young women holding and therefore leading the camera. This way, Sony spread its commercial message promoting video as an easy, cheap, and democratic media. However, the video productions of feminist collectives were not the private, familial, and leisure-oriented 'home video' that Sony's commercials had anticipated. However, beyond its portability and accessibility, there are further arguments explaining why women's collectives found video appropriate for their intentions.

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<sup>7</sup> This is explained in the two sections of her book *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing* that Duguet dedicates to militant video by women's collectives: "Mémoire," 39-66; and "La vidéo des femmes," 89-111.

<sup>8</sup> Fleckinger, "Entretiens avec Carole Roussopoulos," *Nouvelles questions féministes*, 110.

## 1. Organizational Mode: Anti-Authoritarian Collectives

The collective was the organizational mode most commonly associated with early video production in France. Women-led collectives active in Paris in the 1970s included Video Out (formed in 1970, by Carole and Paul Roussopoulos), Vidéo 00 (1971, Anne Couteau, Yvonne Mignot-Lefèbvre, and others), Les Cents Fleurs (1973, Martine Barrar, Annie Caro, Jean-Paul Fargier, and Danielle Jaeggi), Vidéa (1974, Anne-Marie Faure, Isabelle Fraisse, Syn Guerin, and Catherine Lahourcade), and Les Insoumuses (1975, Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, and Ioana Wieder). After 1975, similar collectives spread throughout the rest of France.<sup>9</sup> The cost of purchasing brand-new, expensive technology explains why early videomakers tended to work in couples, groups or collectives. However, beyond sharing equipment, technical skills, training, common interests and ideas, collectives also represented a new societal behavior for women. The lack of women's organizations had been a major concern for Simone de Beauvoir. As early as 1949, in *The Second Sex*, she argued that:

They [women] lack the concrete means to organise themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and unlike the proletariat, they have no solidarity of labor or interests; they even lack their own space that makes communities of American blacks, or the Jews in ghettos, the workers in Saint-Denis or Renault factories. They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests and social conditions to certain men – fathers or husbands – more closely than to other women.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, "Introduction," in *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 8. Originally published as *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 19.

Along with de Beauvoir, whom they frequently viewed as a model, the women who started meeting regularly in spring 1970 at the amphitheater of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and who commonly shared leftist political convictions as well as an aversion to the bourgeoisie, recognized that the formation of women's organization was critical for the path to emancipation. The same year, they founded the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes ("Women's Liberation Movement"), hereafter MLF, which became the first and foremost feminist organization in France.

Unsurprisingly, the activities of the MLF often crossed the path of early video production by women. *La grève des femmes à Troyes* ("The Women's Strike in the City of Troyes"), for example, is commonly credited as the first feminist video produced in France (Fig. 2). It was created in 1971, by a group of five women from the MLF who had no experience or practical training with video.<sup>11</sup> While attempting to edit their tapes at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, the group met Carole Roussopoulos who was also taking advantage of the rare video editing equipment that was made available there, at night, after the school was closed to students. In 1971, Roussopoulos was already experienced with video and recalled helping the group from the MLF to edit their tapes; this is when they also invited her to join their weekly feminist meetings, on Wednesdays, at the amphitheater of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.<sup>12</sup> Roussopoulos later presented the experience of these meetings as crucial for the development of her career and ideas; she

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<sup>11</sup> Active members of the MLF directed this video production: Annette Levy-Willard, Catherine Deudon, Cathy Bernheim, Ned Burgess, and Suzanne Fenn.

<sup>12</sup> Fleckinger, "Entretiens avec Carole Roussopoulos," *Nouvelles questions féministes*, 101-2.

spoke about the atmosphere of humor and solidarity existing among women which is also omnipresent in Roussopoulos's video production in the 1970s, and which gradually focuses more and more on feminist subject matter.

Early video in France embraced a diversity of socio-political causes: pro-homosexuality (Fig. 3), abortion, rape, prostitution, workers rights and racism. The first videotape attesting to the emergence of a homosexual movement in France in the 1970s is *Le FHAR* (an acronym for *Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire*) by Video Out, in 1971. This list of subjects is true of the video material that remains available today. Many videos produced in the 1970s, in particular at the beginning of the decade, are currently reported lost, including Carole Roussopoulos's work from 1970 to 1972, which concerned the Palestinian cause, the New York Black Panthers, as well as the prisons in Algiers. For the most part of the material that remains, videos created in the 1970s were overall centered on women's experience. Especially representative are those productions condemning political dictatorships, which insisted on presenting women's viewpoints of specific regimes. In *Les Mères Espagnoles* ("The Spanish Mothers") and *La Marche des Femmes à Hendaye* ("Women's March in Hendaye"), both created in 1975 by Video Out and Les Insoumuses respectively, the focus was on the position of women as mothers and wives of Basque nationalist militants, who had been victims of persecution, executions and imprisonment by the Franco regime in Spain and in the French Basque Country, in the South, near the Spanish border. Another example is Delphine Seyrig's video *Inès*, produced with Les Insoumuses in 1975, in which the experiences of women victims of political dictatorships are explored through a re-enactment of the rapes and tortures endured by a young

female militant, Inès Etienne Romeu, during her four year imprisonment in Brazil (Fig. 4). Most videos produced in France in the 1970s were actually created by women, and as de Beauvoir points out, “The man most sympathetic to women never knows her concrete situation fully.”<sup>13</sup> Women were creating videos primarily for other women, with the aim of disseminating information valuable to them, and raising political discussions that focused on women’s issues and experiences. Resisting social isolation and discrimination, they also fostered a community of women – a global sisterhood – and modeled forms of solidarity among them.

Early video collectives were in great majority led by and composed of women, and one of them at least was known for actually barring men from participation: the collective Vidéa, created in 1974. In French, the change of an “a” for an “o” feminizes the term “video”.<sup>14</sup> Anne-Marie Faure, Isabelle Fraisse, Syn Guérin and Catherine Lahourcade organized the collective, and most were self-proclaimed lesbians. Guérin and Lahourcade were feminist militants, who received their video training at The Kitchen in New York in the early 1970s, before organizing their own video workshops for women in France. In Paris in April 1974, they realized their first video by taping *Musidora*, the first French festival dedicated to women’s film. *Musidora* was the predecessor of the well-known *Festival International de Films de Femmes de Créteil*. For the first edition in 1974, it did not present video production. The festival was named after well-known French actress for silent movies from the 1950s, who was known for her impersonations of

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<sup>13</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Borde and Malovany-Chevallier (2009), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Vidéa wrote a text manifesto, which was later published: Vidéa, “Filmer les luttes, les vies, les rêves des femmes,” *Cinéma d’aujourd’hui*, nos. 5-6 (March-April 1976): 147-8.

female vampires. The festival took place in three different locations, including ARC (the contemporary Department of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris). *Musidora* was a success; for its first edition it gathered 6000 attendees. Anne-Marie Faure recalled: “This [the festival *Musidora*] prefigured the Sceaux and then the Créteil Festivals. Something like that had never happened. There were films and, after each screening, it was a room with a small stage, and pillows all over the floor in which everyone was wallowing. There were discussions about the technique involved. Can women be in charge of technical issues? Do women have something to say? All these eternal questions... Should we have mixed meetings? This brought something... After *Musidora* why could women not realize [their own audio-visual production]?”<sup>15</sup>

It is at *Musidora* that Guérin and Lahourcade met Faure and Fraisse, and a few months later they started their women-only collective, which was active until 1976.<sup>16</sup> Vidéa was close to a radical trend within the MLF, known as “Groupe des Féministes Révolutionnaires”, and whose notable spokesperson was the feminist theorist and writer Monique Wittig; who had also been one of the former founders of the MLF. Inevitably, the collective’s members were familiar with Wittig’s ideas about female superiority, formulated in her book *Les Guerrières* (1969). This book became a landmark of lesbian literature. In 1976, Wittig left France for the United States; there she developed a more universalist position beyond gender, abolishing gender categories

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<sup>15</sup> Anne-Marie Faure, interview with Yaël Mandelbaum and Julien Marant, *Surpris par la nuit*. My translation.

<sup>16</sup> Anne-Marie Faure, “Notes” (paper presented at the Colloque des Archives Féministes, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, November 20, 2004).

and the social order associated with them.<sup>17</sup> In this early book, Wittig describes a society dominated by Amazonian-type women-warriors engaged in a gender war against men. Faure, a member of Vidéa, recalled that the idea of creating a collective composed exclusively of women had been circulating since the first general assemblies of the MLF in 1971, when positions against mixed-gender organizations were proposed. On only a few occasions did this level of gender separatism impact upon video. The gender exclusiveness of the collective Vidéa was one example, as well as the video festival *Une bande de femmes présente des bandes de femmes*. The name of the festival involved more word play and that translates to English with difficulty. In French, the word “bande” can refer either to “group” or to “videotape”; the suggestion is that both women’s videotapes and women-led organizations were presented at the festival.<sup>18</sup>

Organized by Vidéa and Carole Roussopoulos at the movie theater Action-République in Paris in May 1975, approximately half of the video screenings at the festival were open only to women.

Vidéa was nevertheless an exception because even if most video collectives in France were initiated and populated by women, most of them indifferently accepted men – even if, in the event, only few of them actually joined. In general, video collectives were anti-authoritarian formations that attempted to break with the hierarchical, patriarchal and conservative schemas of French society in the 1970s. Women also developed various tactics to encourage a non-hierarchical and sisterly relationship between individuals and colleagues; for example, they often

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<sup>17</sup> Monique Wittig, *Les Guerrières* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969). See also Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, “The Text as Body/Politics: an Appreciation of Monique Wittig’s Writings in Context,” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 264-87.

<sup>18</sup> Anne-Marie Faure, e-mail correspondence with the author, November 29, 2011.

signed their work with their first names only or, during discussion and meetings, they used to remove chairs and tables to sit together on the floor, at an equal level.<sup>19</sup> Video became instrumental in forming a community of women: screenings in the 1970s were pretexts for meetings and for engaging public discussions in general assemblies; video helped connecting women together as well as contributing to the communication and sharing of experiences by making or viewing video. Video also allowed for exchanges between Paris and other cities in French regions, as well as between feminist and militant groups beyond national borders. Frequently Women's collectives based in Paris regularly travelled to other cities in French regions to show their production or to create video based on social conflicts and interview their protagonists (in Troyes, Besançon, etc.). These attempts prefigured and participated in decentralization that became the focus of French cultural policy in the 1980s. Numerous examples also show occasions of Franco-American connections involving video. Vidéa's production *Kate Millett parle de la prostitution avec des féministes* (1975), discussed in more length below, shows Kate Millett in conversation about prostitution with, among others, Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy (feminist sociologist and writer). Here also, they are informally seated on the floor of a small room whose walls were lined with books.

Women's collectives were also reacting to discrimination and exclusion – forms of oppression they had experienced themselves, especially at work. Examples of this were found in

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<sup>19</sup> Artists of the 1990s involved with Relational Aesthetics, particularly those who use the projected image in museum and gallery settings, have often used similar set-ups with viewers seated together on the floor. However, they are in a position of spectator rather than being actively and equally engaged in conversations about the work.

the misogynist practices described by Duguet in the contiguous fields of television and cinema, where women could hope only for fragmented tasks and subordinate positions.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, portable video allowed women to take responsibility for an entire production – from conception to realization – including the invention of a visual language to illustrate the specificities of their positions.

## 2. Video Production by Collectives

A selection of the most representative videos by women's collectives raises general questions regarding the history of early video: What kind of visual expression was first conceived for the new medium? Should the formal and stylistic treatment be evaluated in regards to the technical possibilities and limitations offered by the medium at its start? Who was the ideal viewer envisioned for these productions? It also shows that, in comparison to the United States and many other countries, French productions in the 1970s, did not focus on the (female) body and its representation.<sup>21</sup> Instead, since a primary use of the video camera was to record interviews, a favorite genre for early video was the video-portrait. These productions used black

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<sup>20</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 89.

<sup>21</sup> In early 2011, MoMA/PS1 in New York organized the exhibition *Modern Women: Single Channel*, arguing for a better consideration of the role of women's video by artists from North and South America, Europe (not including France) and Japan. The majority of the works shown developed in tandem with performance and around the problematic of the (female) body and/or its representation, which was not pervasive theme in early French video.

and white (color was not available until the late 1970s) and were unscripted, based on monologues or dialogues that followed the flow of the sitters' communication.

### **a. Video-Portraits**

*La grève des femmes à Troyes* ("The Women's Strike in the City of Troyes", 1971), mentioned above as the first feminist video produced in France, made by a group of women from the MLF, is an early example of the use of the video-portrait. It also established a genre that would be widely reused throughout the 1970s by other women engaged in militant video. Despite their lack of familiarity with the camera, a group of women from Paris travelled to the city of Troyes in order to record the event with video and express their solidarity with the first women's strike in France. The protest started in the hosiery workshops, which almost exclusively employed women, in objection to the huge number of dismissals and a plan to close the factory, supposedly for economic reasons. The original motivation for the video was an article published in the national newspaper *France Soir* entitled "Elles occupent leur usine après en avoir chassé les hommes" ("They occupy their factory after having evicted the men") (Fig. 5). With sexist overtones, the article drew attention to a female strike that resulted in the workers' occupation of the whole factory. This situation epitomized a common pattern in the industrial sector at the time, which was characterized on the one hand by women returning to the work force, but on the other hand by closure, consolidation and delocalization. In this context, women's jobs, which were often at the bottom of the socio-professional ladder, were habitually the first to be lost. As a consequence, early video by women's collectives focused primarily on

gender and class struggles at the workplace, especially in factories, where social conflicts were numerous and vigorous throughout the 1970s.

When the MLF team arrived, the conflict had just ended, and the demonstrators had accepted the modest financial compensation negotiated for them by the unions and offered by the factory owners. The women's revolt was over and in the voice-over that accompanies the images, the team admits that the eventual realization of the video was only due to the audacity of one woman demonstrator, Doudou, who had crossed the picket line of male union members and reached out to them (Fig. 6). The video that resulted from this became a video-portrait of Doudou, who remains at the center of the frame for almost its entire fifty-minute duration – often with early video by collectives, and since they favored real-time recordings, the duration of the productions corresponded to the length of videotapes available on the market. Known only by her nickname, she engages in a monologue and relates, with eloquence and passion, the occupation of the factory and the solidarity among the women, both unlike anything she had ever experienced before. Only occasionally does she allow herself to be interrupted by her colleagues surrounding her in the camera frame, or by the questions asked by the video team who gradually let her take control over the video's content and development. Leadership qualities in women were, at this time, rarely seen, recorded or shown publicly; this alone is surely the motivation behind this video and the reason for its success. Today, it presents an extraordinary document of women's self-expression and emancipation, using a direct language – sometimes angry, sometimes crude, sometimes inappropriate, but always humorous.

Between 1973 and 1976, Carole Roussopoulos worked together with Video Out – the collective she founded with her husband Paul in 1972 – to create a series of six videos entitled *LIP*. LIP was a watch factory in Besançon, in Eastern France, whose workforce was 70% female and which became the scene of massive demonstrations repressed by the authorities, from 1973 to 1976, when the management decided to close the factory for economic reasons (Fig. 7). In France, the demonstrations at LIP became a symbol of worker’s struggle and emancipation due to a chapter of the conflict from June 1973 until early 1974, when the workers organized themselves around the slogan “On fabrique, on vend, on se paie”. Without centralized direction, the workers self-managed the production, the sale, and the distribution of income. Inevitably, this ultimately led toward the liquidation of the LIP factory in early 1976.<sup>22</sup>

In the *LIP* video series, Carole Roussopoulos devotes her camera to the workers, especially women, and the final production alternates between footage of demonstrations and extensive testimonials. Based on lived experience, these testimonials are replete with immediate and personal histories that unfolded slowly in the course of real-time recording, the length of the recordings span between thirty minutes to almost an hour. Roussopoulos understood that video gave voice not only to her as the director but also to those who stood in front of her camera. She was outspoken about the larger potential of video to communicate about underrepresented groups, in comparison with other media. In a recent interview, she noted:

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<sup>22</sup> Christian Rouaud, *Les LIP, l’imagination au pouvoir*, video (Paris: Les Films d’Ici, 2009). Vimeo, <http://vimeo.com/9903456> (accessed November 12, 2011). It is a recent video documentary using worker’s testimonies to reconstruct how the social conflict at LIP unfolded. Contrasting with the content of early video by collectives this recent production does not leave a significant place to LIP female’s workers.

My idea has always been to give voice to people who were not heard or seen. Outside of any demagogy, the ones who make history and create changing ideas are the people (...). If this is not marketable, nothing is going to be said on television or in the newspaper. Video is an ideal tool to give a voice to someone, by contrast with cinema, which is heavy and technically complicated.<sup>23</sup>

In the *LIP* series, Roussopoulos finds that her camera, as with the MLF team, is attracted to charismatic female personalities, and the format of video-portrait allows her to isolate them from the mass. There is Monique, for example, whom Roussopoulos met among a crowd of demonstrators in front of the LIP factory in 1973, while filming the first of the series (Fig. 8). Her full name was Monique Piton but in this video, as in most militant productions at the time, only first names of directors and participants were mentioned. Monique reappears regularly in *LIP* series to share her experience of the conflict and discuss the intricacies of the factory world, which she does with intelligence and humor. She is interested in speaking about the place of women among workers, as well as the relationships between the female workers at the factory. Despite Monique's charisma, Roussopoulos's approach insists on confronting the experiences of other protagonists too, which permits a variety of viewpoints on the strike. In *LIP 5*, realized in 1976, a video-portrait of Christiane stands out when she articulates at length her experience with the leaders of factory unions – especially the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail, “General Confederation of Labor”) and CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail, “French Democratic Confederation of Labor) –, particularly her difficulties in being heard by her male representatives as she tried to become an active union member (Fig. 9). It must be noted

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<sup>23</sup> Dario Marchiori, “Interview with Carole Roussopoulos (March 2 and 3, 2009),” *International Documentary Film Festival* (Trieste: NODO, 2009), 45.

that in the 1970s, French unions continued to be patriarchal bastions of the industrial sector, and even resisted women's participation at LIP, despite its substantial female workforce.

There is another video production that addressed the tension between women and unions: *Où est-ce qu'on se mai?*, which was created in 1976 by the collective *Les Insoumuses*. Its title, inspired by a banner used on May 1<sup>st</sup> in a women's demonstration, is difficult to translate in English. It created the confusion between spelling mistake and wordplay and mixed the month of May and the verb "to place", both sharing the same phonetic in French language. However, formulated as a question, the title addressed the place of women in society. In France, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, May 1<sup>st</sup> represents Labor Day; when unions traditionally organize massive demonstrations. In 1976, the women's movement decided to set its own protest in order to call attention on women's difficulties in a male dominated society. The video is based on footage of a friendly and pacifist women's demonstration followed by testimonies of participants, women and children, describing its aftermath in violent and sexist, verbal and physical aggressions toward them by the members of the union. Obviously, the women protest was understood as a cooptation of the union's militant territory and was, therefore, repressed by them. According to Duguet, early videos in France based on the theme of workers should be considered in light of a militant tradition that has always designated the domain of work as its central battlefield with the aim of revealing the superstructures of class struggle and of systems of oppression in their cultural, political and administrative apparatuses.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, beyond addressing gender, the *LIP* series also exposed class issues among women workers: Monique and Christiane, for example,

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<sup>24</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 42.

represented different classes of workers in the factory hierarchy; Monique was part of the administrative staff while Christiane was a manual worker. Both explain that, before the strike broke out, they had rarely communicated with one another, but since both faced the possibility of being laid off from their jobs at LIP, they now shared common interests.

The *LIP* video series continued for four years and as the social conflict progressed, various gradual transformations became apparent. Perhaps the most conspicuous development is the self-assurance gradually gained by the women when speaking in front of the camera. It is unclear to what extent their familiarization over time with the camera, or the presence of the camera itself, played a part in this process of affirmation, emancipation and self-construction that characterized this phase of the French feminist movement. However, these considerations could be extended to both sides of the camera; video was an empowering tool for women in the 1970s, whether they directed, appeared in, or took part in other phases of the production process. In addition, Carole Roussopoulos explained that when Video Out went to LIP, she and Paul taught women how to use video and lent an unidentified group of women a camera for them to record the conflict and their general assemblies their own way.<sup>25</sup>

In her scholarship on feminist films of the 1970s, H el ene Fleckinger has drawn a direct correlation between women's reappropriation of their bodies and their appropriation of the video camera: "Since only the oppressed are able to analyze and theorize their oppression, it is their

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<sup>25</sup> Roussopoulos, interview with Ya el Mandelbaum and Julien Marant, *Surpris par la nuit*.

duty to create their own images and engage in a political process of self-representation.”<sup>26</sup> If it is arguable that only the oppressed can speak about their own oppression, then it is certainly true that in France in the 1970s, those willing to question and advance women’s rights were almost exclusively women. More importantly, however, Fleckinger insists on the urgency of women to engage with their own representation in order to escape the oppressive social structures that have so long determined the construction of their image. Similarly, US video historian Martha Gever has described a women’s video production that developed in 1970s and 1980s in the US, with the same objective to advance women’s representation and fight stereotypes; addressing female stereotypes and social roles is central to the caustic wit of the video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* by US artist Martha Rosler (1975).<sup>27</sup>

## **b. Women’s Self-Representation**

In the mid-1970s, women’s self-representation became a gesture of political action; this also corresponded to an unprecedented surge of women’s creation and calls for women’s (artistic) initiatives. In 1975, for example, Hélène Cixous published *Le rire de la méduse* (“The Laugh of the Medusa”), followed shortly by her book *La jeune née* (“The Newly Born

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<sup>26</sup> Fleckinger, “I Own my Body,” 53.

<sup>27</sup> Martha Gever, “Video Politics: Early Feminist Projects,” in ed. Doug Kahn and Diane Neumaier, *Cultures in Contention* (Seattle: Real Comer Press, 1985), 92-101; Gever, “Histoire polémique de la vidéo féministe,” in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, 167-82.

Woman”).<sup>28</sup> Both texts were emblematic of this momentum towards women finding their own form of expression and, more precisely, at formulating new ways of writing. Cixous helped formulating the concept of “écriture féminine” (“women’s writing”) that attempted to isolate and emphasize specificities in female’s language. It must be noted that, in the mid-1970s, Hélène Cixous was not popular in France. She was contested within the women’s movement for her critical evaluation of de Beauvoir’s ideas, which were then still dominant. Additionally, Cixous showed an interest in psychoanalytic theory, which was attacked by many French feminists during the same period. Beyond Cixous’s well-known effort in this direction were many other less emblematic contemporary initiatives in video and cinema that encouraged women’s increased involvement in the process of artistic creation. There is for instance the poem “Sujet-Objet, où suis-je?” (“Subject-Object, Where am I?”) by feminist writer and journalist, Nicole Lise Bernheim, from 1976. As a primary source, this text was part of an edited book, compiling statements, poetry, texts on video and cinema, all written by women:

Women, in the starting blocks, to bed.

Women, in the starting blocks, to bed. And when you go to the movie, you see yourself, as they desire you, as they imagine you. Images. Allowed images, imposed images.

NO. Change.

Please, let’s change this. Let’s write a new script.

Actresses. Are they women? Characters? Incarnations, figurations? Things, objects?

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<sup>28</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Le rire de la méduse,” *L’Arc*, no. 61, *Simone de Beauvoir et la lutte des femmes* (May 1975): 39-54; Cixous, *La jeune née* (Paris: Union Générale d’Edition, 1975).

Table, chair, women, actresses.

Wood, plastic, vinyl, my life-size inflatable doll. Ready to be used. When used, thrown away: old object.

Saying this kind of thing is horrible. Maybe it is the opposite that seek the *new* women-actresses, who want to work with the director and staff to make together a production.<sup>29</sup>

Bernheim called women to question their current image in audio-visual and to engage in a process of self-representation using self-expression; she points out the need for women to take part in the earliest stages of the formation of this image, in the production phase or in collaboration with (women) directors.

One of the most representative videos to articulate Bernheim's questions, and which focused on women's self-representation, is *Sois belle et tais-toi* ("Be Pretty and Shut Up") by Delphine Seyrig. Seyrig is still more recognized for her talents as an actress in French and Hollywood movies rather than for her militant video production. She was the female lead in Alain Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* ("Last Year in Marienbad", 1961). She also played Jeanne Dielman in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), in which Akerman records Dielman's daily routine as housewife, mother, and prostitute. It must be noted that Seyrig's involvement in the women's movement along with her

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<sup>29</sup> Nicole-Lise Bernheim, "Sujet-Objet, où suis-je?," in *Paroles... Elles tournent!*, ed. Des femmes de Musidora (Paris: des femmes, 1976), 36-7. My translation. The editors of this independently published volume are known only as "women of Musidora", in reference to the actress and the film festival carrying the same name. The title of the volume is another play on words. It refers to the phrase, "Silence – Filming in process" used in sound studios, but substitutes "Paroles" ("Speech" or "Words") for "Silence", therefore encouraging women to express themselves publicly and artistically, rather than remaining silent and becoming victim of stereotypical representation applied to them.

independent video production often put her acting career at risk. Produced by Les Insoumuses, the collective she had recently founded with Carole Roussopoulos and Ioana Wieder, *Sois belle* is Seyrig's first and most ambitious video production. Shot in 1975 and 1976 between Paris and Los Angeles, it comprises twenty-two combined video-portraits of, and interviews with, actresses and colleagues of Seyrig, including Jane Fonda, Marie Dubois and Barbara Steel, to mention a few of the best known (Fig. 10).

In *Sois belle* it was Carole Roussopoulos who stood behind the camera, while Seyrig directed her. Significantly, Roussopoulos recalled that for this production Seyrig requested her to only use the camera on a tripod and to film medium close-ups with occasional zooms, "as is usually done for heads of state"; Roussopoulos said that she learned from Seyrig the importance of the frame in video, to elevate or manipulate the status of her subjects.<sup>30</sup> In *Sois belle*, the actresses freely and frankly articulate their positions as women in the movie and television industries (Fig. 11). Using a minimal editing process, a playful discussion is shaped among the video's participants, who answer a set of predetermined questions one after the other, creating the impression of dialogue among them. This impression was further reinforced by the fact that Seyrig's voice could regularly be heard speaking from behind the camera, asking a question or spontaneously reacting to what was said. Because portable video was equipped with a microphone, sound recording could take place simultaneously with the taping of the image, and permitted the directors' voices to be heard in video-portrait from behind the camera, naturally engaging the sitter in informal conversation; this feature was common to many early video-

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<sup>30</sup> Marchiori, "Interview with Carole Roussopoulos," 49.

portraits. Typical questions asked to the actresses include, “Would you have been an actress if you had been born male?” “To what extent do female stereotypes and male monopoly affect cinema?” “Have you ever played a role that engaged you in a positive relationship or a friendship with another woman?” The actresses spoke about the objectification of women in society, and the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes in television and cinema, which commonly characterize them either as naïve or evil, frigid or highly sexed, and always unable to establish or sustain stable social relationships, thus also unable to grow personally, socially and professionally. This image regime does not, of course, reflect who women are as individuals, nor how they interact with others in real life, and conversely Seyrig’s video intends to emphasize this distance between women being directed, in the position of acting, and their true self.

Many actresses also express their fear of losing their own identity when they take on roles that have been designed for them by men. As Duguet notes: “They have to impersonate role models that, along with any other women, they are also the victim of.”<sup>31</sup> By contrast, in *Sois-belle*, in front of a video camera operated by a sympathetic woman and fellow actress, the women present themselves in ways not seen before. Thus, unlike standardized depictions of women circulating in the media, *Sois belle* also presented a collection of individual portraits that proposed an assortment of very distinctive female personalities and individualities. Jane Fonda appears, for instance, full of humor, mature and lucid when she explains how she has been advised by casting directors along her career to change her hair color, wear fake breasts or even consider plastic surgery to alter the appearance of her nose or of her jaw. By contrast, Maria

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<sup>31</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 105. My translation.

Schneider is shy, sensitive and pained when she recalls having to play nude scenes with an aging Marlon Brando, in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), when she was only twenty years old.

The 1970s saw a new interest in individuality, allied with new models of social behavior specifically addressed to women. Valerie Solanas touched on these topics in her notorious *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, written in English in 1967 and translated into French in 1971; even if it was already out of print by the mid-1970s, her ideas were well-known in France, especially among female intellectuals and feminists. With its incendiary acronym for “Society for Cutting Up Men”, Solanas’s manifesto is principally remembered as a proposal for male genocide. However, it also called for a valorization of individual expression, through which she envisioned the possibility of social interactions beyond traditional familial, racial or sexual affiliations.

According to Solanas:

A true community consists in individuals – not mere species members, not couples – respecting each other’s individuality and privacy, at the same time interacting with each other mentally and intellectually – free spirits in free relation to each other – and cooperating with each other to achieve common ends. Traditionalists say the basic unit of ‘society’ is the family: ‘hippies’ say the tribe; no one says the individual.<sup>32</sup>

A similar direction towards an increased acknowledgment of individuality was also present in early French video. This is best exemplified in the choice of video-portrait, a format that was characterized by uninterrupted and unscripted recordings and a straightforward expression of personality. However, this temptation to valorize individualism often conflicted with traditional

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<sup>32</sup> Valerie Solanas, *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (New York: The Olympia Press, 1968), 49. French translation by Emmanuelle de Lesseps (Paris: Nouvelle Société Olympia, 1971).

forms of Marxist and feminist resistance, which conventionally denigrated individualism as bourgeois, in favor of collective authorship, ownership and organization of society.

Despite this, examples of early French video such as the *LIP* series or *Sois belle* contributed to self-representation and individual expression. There were also technological considerations and limitations specific to video in the early stages of its development, which help explain why video was often considered an ideal medium with which to record and communicate the complex diversity of individual experiences. On the one hand, Fargier explains that the endless and uninterrupted recordings of personal histories so common to early video can be explained by the affordability of videotapes along with the absence of editing technology.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Duguet suggests that the flexibility of portable video favored intimate or one-to-one relationships that encouraged the emergence of a more informal discourse. She notes that the ability to see what is recorded in real-time, as well as the possibility of quickly erasing unwanted takes, created a climate of spontaneity and confidence between director and subject that rarely existed in film.<sup>34</sup> What was at stake was the invention of a more democratic and egalitarian experience than was possible with other audio-visual media. Indeed, early video challenged the traditional hierarchy of director and actor, allowing a more fluid exchange and communication among all participants, be they anonymous, amateurs or professional actors.

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<sup>33</sup> Fargier, "Histoire de la vidéo française," in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, 51-2. The U-matic editing system only became available in France in 1979.

<sup>34</sup> Anne-Marie Duguet, "Ecrire en vidéo," *Film Action*, no. 1 (December 1981): 110.

The *LIP* project nevertheless came under fire in the 1970s. Critics questioned both the choice of sitters and the projects' ability to be representative of the diversity of people involved in the struggles. The use of video-portrait as subject matter was a particular target of this criticism. Duguet recalls that the *LIP* series was blamed for contributing to "stardomania" by insisting on filming "leaders": "An individual alone cannot manifest a collective viewpoint since one's lived experience provides only a limited view on a general matter."<sup>35</sup> This reference to stardomania is synchronous with, but differs from, Rosalind Krauss's contention that early American video art is "narcissistic", since it is based on artists representing themselves or their own bodies, and adopts a psychoanalytic mode of address (unlike film), due to their incorporation of feedback mechanisms.<sup>36</sup> This criticism subsequently points out the reception of this type of production by a potential viewer, which also happens in a video-portrait through a process of identification with the sitter.

The psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan allows us to push further the analysis of the video-portrait, especially when received by a female viewer. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" was an essay he published in 1966, after its presentation in July 1949 at the XVI International Congress of Psychoanalysis.<sup>37</sup> I

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<sup>35</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 48-9. My translation.

<sup>36</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 50-64.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic theory," translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-7. Originally published as "Le stade du mirror comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique," in *Écrits* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1966), 93-100.

would like to suggest that early video using the format of video-portrait, which creates a face-to-face between sitter and viewer, on both sides of the television screen, offers a similar visual and psychological experience to the mirror described by Lacan. In ‘The Mirror Stage’, Lacan argues that a confrontation with the mirror image is crucial in early childhood development for the formation of the “I,” as “Ideal-self” or ego, and the formation of individual subjectivity. Lacan also suggests that the experience of the mirror stage constantly recurs during a subject’s lifetime. The ego is both necessary for individual development (he compares it to a ‘fortress’) and an illusory misrecognition (the ego is a construction, a function of the imaginary). In Lacan’s words: “We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.”<sup>38</sup> Lacan foregrounds our desire to identify with or assume an image, which when applied to the regime of video-portraiture suggests the viewer’s identification with the image on screen and even with the qualities of the sitter. The screen in the video-portrait functions like the reflective surface of the mirror: it offers a life-size, frontal and animated depiction of a human visage in real-time.

As with the mirror stage, the experience of identification is at first anticipatory and formative, but can also become constraining and misleading. This is when Lacan describes the mirror stage as restrictive and limiting for the formation of the ego:

The symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other [...] the important

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 2.

point is that this form [Ideal-I] situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.<sup>39</sup>

The desire to identify with modeled images and pre-existing qualities could, then, jeopardize and negate women's interest in promoting individuality as a constructive value. Krauss' argument reached similar conclusions when she explains that the aesthetics of Narcissism also ultimately corresponds to "the unchanging condition of a perpetual frustration".<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the threat of stardomania, for which the *LIP* video series was repeatedly criticized, suggests the objectification and eventual formation of new models of collective identity and of conformism, which would hide rather than reveal one's identity. This was arguably limiting for both individual and collective development. At the same time, Lacan's conclusions on the mirror stage ("I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality") indicate that both psychoanalysis and early video reached similar conclusions and sought similar goals, albeit by different means.<sup>41</sup> Both were looking for a better understanding of the individual and of his/her inscription within a psychologically and socially constructed reality.

Although a psychoanalytical reading of the video-portrait is useful, it must be noted that women involved in early French video in general resisted engaging with theory, and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>40</sup> Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 64.

<sup>41</sup> Lacan, "The mirror stage," trans. Sheridan (2008), 4.

psychoanalysis in particular. (This lack of interest in psychoanalysis contrasts with the enthusiasm for it among filmmakers and theorists in the United States and United Kingdom. A similar divide is pointed out by Deanne Pytlinski in the second chapter of her dissertation, “Utopian Visions: Women in Early Video Art”: US women video’s engaged with McLuhan’s communications theory and participated as well in its criticism, whereas French women’s collective totally ignored him.)<sup>42</sup> Duguet justified this as a desire for accuracy and an attempt to remain as close as possible to their subjects, not wishing “to substitute the worker’s voices with an *a priori* and foreign analysis [...] that cannot encompass the evolution of possible or real consciousness, the transformation of sensitivity and perception.”<sup>43</sup> Psychoanalysis was unpopular with the first generation of French feminists as well as with feminist video collectives. De Beauvoir, the most authoritative voice on feminism in France in the 1970s, had been outspoken in her criticism of psychoanalysis, and dedicated the second chapter of *The Second Sex* to a denunciation of the traditionally male-dominated perspective within which psychoanalysis had developed.<sup>44</sup> In addition, she disputed Freud’s definition of women as passive and incomplete – inadequacies that she blamed on psychoanalysis’s gender determinism and misogyny. This rejection of psychoanalysis is also attested in early video, when Faure (a member of the collective Vidéa, which was affiliated with Wittig’s group “Féministes Révolutionnaires”)

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<sup>42</sup> Deanne Pytlinski, “Utopian Visions: Women in Early Video Art” (PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 48. My translation.

<sup>44</sup> De Beauvoir, “The Viewpoint of Psychoanalysis,” in *The Second Sex*, trans. by Borde and Malovany-Chevallier (2009), 92-110.

explains that the only other militant feminist group with which they did not want to communicate with was “Psychanalyse et Politique”, a group lead by the Lacanian theorist and writer Antoinette Fouque, who was also one of the founding members of the MLF.<sup>45</sup> Fouque was influential in the development of Cixous’ engagement with psychoanalysis. Both were more interested in Lacan than in Freud, the latter being the target of 1970s feminism, and both were extremely critical of de Beauvoir’s existentialism. By the end of the 1970s, growing tensions between Wittig’s “Féministes Révolutionnaires” and Fouque’s “Psychanalyse et Politique” resulted in a fatal scission within the MLF. At the same time, despite its aversion to psychoanalysis, early video did not reject all theoretical approaches and obviously embraced most ideas coming out of or contributing to feminism.

### **c. Video versus Television**

In the process of women’s sustained attacks on stereotypes and reappropriation of their own image, one of the main targets was television, in the 1970s still identified by feminists as a misogynist territory. In order to confront television, they created videos that pointed out its biased and sexist content resulting from its exclusive control by male executives. On the other hand, they also used video to create an alternative content that sought to be more representative of, appropriate and interesting for a female viewer.

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<sup>45</sup> Anne-Marie Faure, e-mail correspondence with the author, December 10, 2011.

A prime example of video addressing the patriarchal tenor of French television is a video by the collective Les Insoumuses using Solana's *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (Fig. 12). Titled *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, the video shows Carole Roussopoulos and Delphine Seyrig facing one another at a kitchen table; this time it is Paul Roussopoulos, Carole's husband, who stands behind the camera. Seyrig reads out loud from the French translation of Solanas's book, while Roussopoulos records what she hears on a typewriter; between them, a television monitor broadcasts the French news. It is notable that the video-portrait format was abandoned in favor of a more performative action and staged setting, and the video deploys a wider camera angle to frame the two women in profile, in a room whose walls are lined with books. In the history of portraiture, sitters presented with books generally intends to communicate the erudition of the depicted figure; these props might have been considered meaningful also in early video where these features are also commonly found. This stands in sharp contrast to the minimal close-ups used in the video-portraits, which focus on selected faces but remove as much contextual information from the scene as possible. In *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, the video frame is fixed on the two women seated at the table, breaking only for occasional zooms onto the television monitor; Seyrig interrupts her reading to turn up the volume of the television monitor, while Roussopoulos smokes a cigarette. Through this manual and spontaneous editing process, generated in real-time, extracts from Solanas's book are intertwined with that day's news coverage of wars, nuclear threat, violent demonstrations and terrorism. Furthermore, listening to Solanas's uncompromising critique of masculinity juxtaposed with television images showing an endless parade of male heads of state, or as soldiers in the wars of Korea and Lebanon, reinforces Solanas's interpretation of male hegemony and inclination to violence, as well as the media's

complicity in this process.<sup>46</sup> Significantly, in the news broadcast on the day the video was taped, the only images of women involve Catholics and Protestants side by side in a pacifist march in Belfast to protest against violence, between the British army and the IRA (Irish Republican Army) in Northern Ireland. In *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, the presence of a screen within a screen, a television monitor placed at the center of the video's composition, uses video to comment on television and thereby creates critical distance, allowing a better understanding of the misogyny in and on television. Furthermore, the framing presents television as omnipresent in contemporary daily life, with the television monitor as a familiar object of the living room, so that its best-known figures – such as the news anchorman – also seem to sit at the table with the rest of the family.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, since French television was a public service, yet had totally interrupted transmission during the events of May '68, a further object of critique was its supposed (political) neutrality and objectivity. A climate of suspicion surrounded television's intentions and substance in the post-68 period: television was routinely described as a tool for the exercise of state control and authority. “La police vous parle tous les soirs à 20h” (“The police

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<sup>46</sup> Indicative of a contemporary interest in Les Insoumuses' productions, the Swiss artist Angela Marzullo has created a partial remake of Roussopoulos and Seyrig's *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* as part of her video series *Performing* (2003-5), in which she re-enacts video-performance works from the 1970s. In *Performing S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, Marzullo featured two young girls (the artist's daughters) seating at a table in a children's room, one reading and one typing on a children's typewriter, while the television monitor between them shows violent cartoons designed for boys. See Julia Hountou, “Angela Marzullo sur les traces de Carole Roussopoulos,” *Turbulences vidéo*, no. 66 (January 2010): 19-27.

<sup>47</sup> For a similar critique of the intrusion of television into people's living rooms, see Vito Acconci, “Television, Furniture, and Sculpture” (1984). Vito Acconci, “Television, Furniture, and Sculpture: The Room with The American View (1984),” in *Det Lumineuze Beeld* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1984); reprinted in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, 1990), 124-34.

talk to you every day at 8 PM”), was a famous slogan during the counter-information movement of May 68, referring to the hour when all French television channels broadcast the evening news. The evening news, even today, is an institution in France: the moment when the family gathers together around the table to have dinner while watching and commenting on the news.

Another significant video that represents a direct attack on television is *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (“Maso and Miso Get onto the Same Boat”, 1976), by Les Insoumuses (Fig. 13). This video focuses on the 1970s climate of misogyny and sexism still dominant in French television. *Maso et Miso* is based on Delphine Seyrig’s recording of a television show that aired on Antenne 2 (Channel Two) and was hosted by Bernard Pivot, a journalist and interviewer known today as one of French television’s most erudite personalities, but who was famous in the 1970s for his provocative and satirical political radio shows. The title of this prime-time special, “Encore un jour et l’année de la femme, ouf, c’est fini!” (“One More Day and the Woman’s Year is Over, Phew!”), was clearly provocation to female viewers, while attempting to lure their male counterparts. It was programmed to commemorate the end of 1975 as “Year of the Woman”, a celebration declared by the United Nations that was widely criticized by French feminists as a “mystification”. Pivot’s special guest was Françoise Giroud, appointed the first Secretary of State for Women’s Affairs by the French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, from July 1974 to August 1976, before being appointed Minister of Culture until March 1977. For *Maso et Miso*, the video team appropriates and manipulates the original recording of Pivot’s TV special by using a variety of techniques, which allow them to reply to the television show by adding their

own comments and questions. They also insert some texts, such as a hand-written message introducing the video: “We have always thought that a Secretary of State for Women’s Affairs and the Year of the Woman were both delusions. Here is an official proof.”<sup>48</sup> The collective experiments with precursors of editing techniques, such as freeze-frames and video “scratching”, which they were the first in France to use. ‘Scratching’ is best known today for its use in a music context: DJs manipulating manually the rhythm of a record to obtain a variation of sounds; the same was done with early video as an editing technique, which allowed them to vary the rhythm of the tape and dramatize specific moments in the television show.<sup>49</sup>

The script for Pivot’s show was self-evident: it involved Françoise Giroud being invited on French television to face comments by outspoken misogynists throughout the program; these included television personalities (José Arthur, Pierre Bellemare and Jacques Martin), the chairman of Antenne 2 (Marcel Julian) and other political figures (such as Alexandre Sanguinetti). The video’s title, *Maso et Miso*, an abbreviation of ‘masochist’ and ‘misogynist,’ summarizes the ambience of the television show as a combination of sarcasm, provocation and bad entertainment; it also refers to the perverse impression of pleasure conveyed by Giroud, who either defended misogynist behavior or happily engaged with the men in sexist jokes. Concluding their video with another hand-written message, Les Insoumuses summarize the work’s aim:

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<sup>48</sup> My translation.

<sup>49</sup> See Nathalie Mangan, “Maso et Miso vont en bateau,” *Images de la culture*, no. 20 (August 2005): 15.

Our purpose is to show that no woman can represent all the other women within any patriarchal government. She can only incarnate 'the feminine condition' that oscillates between the necessity to delight (feminization-maso) and the desire to access power (masculinization-miso). [...] No images of television can or want to represent us. We explain ourselves with video.<sup>50</sup>

Here, video is clearly identified as an ideal, independent tool for women's expression, in contrast to television's discriminatory practices. Furthermore, they comment on women's own ambivalence towards power and criticize their frequent elision of sexual difference. In 1987, film theorist Ginette Vincendeau argued that "It's not difficult to ascribe this elision of sexual difference from Film Theory to a larger cultural context: France is still an openly patriarchal and sexist society, where women intellectuals as a whole have to emulate male models to get recognition."<sup>51</sup> But much earlier, de Beauvoir had also expressed concerns regarding the "masculinization" of women and the way in which this was often necessary for women in positions of power. She even located this ambivalence in class and suggested that women from the bourgeoisie are more likely to ally with men than with other women, unlike the working class. In short, she explained: "Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior casts confers on them."<sup>52</sup> In the 1970s, despite the awakening of a feminist consciousness, many women were not yet ready to

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<sup>50</sup> My translation.

<sup>51</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, "Women Cinema, Film Theory, and Feminism in France," *Screen: the Journal of Society for Education in Film and Television* 28, no. 4 (1987): 7.

<sup>52</sup> De Beauvoir, "Introduction," in *The Second Sex*, trans. by Borde and Malovany-Chevallier (2009), 10.

abandon the privileges traditionally reserved to their social status, as proved by Giroud on the television show and pointed out by Les Insoumuses.

In interviews Carole Roussopoulos often commented on *Maso et Miso*, especially on the period following its release in the independent Parisian movie theater l'Entrepôt, one of the rare locations in France where it was occasionally possible to publicly view militant video produced by women's collectives. Roussopoulos recalled that Françoise Giroud exercised pressure through her private secretary to withdraw the video from distribution in exchange for a grant, which the collective refused. Roussopoulos also attested that the recordings of Pivot's TV special with Françoise Giroud have subsequently disappeared from the archives of INA, the National Institute for Audio-Visual, whose main mission is to preserve the totality of the programs broadcast on French public radio and television, for documentary or research purposes. *Maso et Miso* is not the only instance of censorship that reveals the integral relationship between French television and early video by women's collectives. Although French television recorded Jean Genet reading one of his pamphlets in reaction to the incarceration of Angela Davis in the United States, for her defense of the Black Panthers, this was never broadcast; anticipating that the ORTF (the public organization in charge of radio and television in France) would censor his public denunciation of a racist politics of oppression, Jean Genet asked Carole Roussopoulos to record the French television shoot with her own brand new video camera. *Jean Genet parle d'Angela Davis* ("Jean Genet speaks about Angela Davis", 1970) was Roussopoulos's first video (Fig. 14). Today, it is also the only existing document that records the renowned French novelist, poet and political activist Jean Genet and his outraged public address. *Jean Genet parle d'Angela Davis*, by Carole

Roussopoulos, was acquired in 2001 for the new media collection at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It is currently the only militant video in the Collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne.

Even more provocative, however, are those videos produced on the basis of what would never be shown on national public television, because its content would be considered too controversial. These videos are often also the most graphic and intimidating. *Y'a qu'à pas baisser* ("You're Better Off Not Fucking", 1971-3), for example, by Carole Roussopoulos and Video Out, is a video about abortion. 1971 was a year of unprecedented actions organized by women in favor of abortion rights in France. Among them was the "Manifeste des 343 salopes" ("Manifesto of the 343 Sluts"), a petition signed by 343 women, intellectuals, and actresses who claimed to have had abortions. De Beauvoir wrote the text of the manifesto and signed it, along with Seyrig and others. It was published in the weekly magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1971. According to French law, all signatories of the manifesto risked time in jail. Back in the 1940s, abortion was considered as a crime against the State punishable by execution by guillotine. If it is difficult for the modern viewer to appreciate just how provocative this video was in its time, it should be noted that birth control became legal in France only in 1974, and abortion in 1975. In the early 1970s, when *Y'a qu'à pas baisser* was made, abortion was punishable by French law. Disregarding this threat, the participants in the video never hide their faces and even reveal personal information. *Y'a qu'à pas baisser* starts with interviews that Roussopoulos conducted with women on the margins of a notorious pro-contraception and abortion protest that took place in Paris on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1971 (Fig. 15). These women, who

attend the event rather than participating in it, are mostly sympathetic with its cause, but claim to be too old or too shy to join the protest. One is more resilient, an elderly woman, whose response to the question of abortion gives the video its naughty title, “You’re Better Off Not Fucking”. Following these brief interviews, the viewer is abruptly subjected to a graphic and unedited presentation of an abortion, taking place in front of Roussopoulos’s camera (Fig. 16). What immediately stands out is the congenial and even relaxed atmosphere in the abortion room, in sharp contrast to the graphic character of the images and the nature of the procedure taking place. The aim was to remove some of the fear around abortion, while describing medical procedures in simple terms, via a conversation between doctor and patient; this conferred an educational tone to the video that also demystified the abortion procedure.

Other videos by women’s collectives address the topic of women’s health. In general, these are not only intended to educate women about their bodies, but also deconstruct official messages on health that were spread and popularized by the mass media. *Accouche!* (“Deliver!”), for example, a video created in 1977 by Ioana Wieder with Les Insoumuses, is a production about the so-called “anti-pain childbirth method”, which had been formulated by Dr. Leboyer and made popular in France in the 1970s via press and television (Fig. 17). In French slang “Accouche!” is a macho way of saying, “Tell us what you have to say, already”. The majority of the video comprises interviews with women who had undergone childbirth with Leboyer’s method and who denounced his anti-pain arguments. They observe that Leboyer, a male doctor, has no understanding of childbirth and its discomforts, and are critical of the fact that he is nevertheless considered a major French authority on childbirth. In addition, *Accouche!* touches

on the taboo subject of maternal instincts at a time dominated by the question of women returning to work and their struggle for emancipation from patriarchy. In the 1970s, maternal instincts were still presented as a natural impulse biologically present in women, but had begun to be called into question by feminists as a socially-determined behavior. A philosopher, historian and feminist, Badinter argues that maternal instincts are a social construct, by conducting an historical investigation that revealed how women's attitudes towards maternity varied at different times and cultures.<sup>53</sup> Once again, early video became a tool for counter-information, positioning itself against television.

### **3. Distribution: Restrictions and Alternatives**

Despite the democratic potential of video, based on its reproducibility, which had been recognized at its beginning in France as well as in other countries, the main limitation encountered by militant video in France in the 1970s was the difficulty of creating a network for the distribution of its products. The reason typically given for this was the lack of marketability due to the poor visual quality of these videos. This is an argument that can be used against commercial distribution in movie theaters or on private television channels, but is far less convincing within a public television system funded by the state and which claims to be above commercial imperatives. From the viewpoint of television professionals, early video was not shown in France due to the incompatibility of video formats with those used by television, even

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<sup>53</sup> Elisabeth Badinter, *L'amour en plus: histoire de l'amour maternel (XVIIe-XXe siècle)*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1981).

if a few video productions emanating from the Service de la Recherche of the ORTF were occasionally broadcasts (discussed in the Chapter Three). Furthermore, it was known that in the United Kingdom and the United States, artists' video was shown on television throughout the 1970s without encountering technical difficulties. French TV's disdain for early video reveals that it conceived its audience as drastically limited in number and diversity. Above all, however, it was the controversial and critical positions addressed in early video by women collectives that prevented their wider distribution, since they were so often critical of French television. As a consequence, collectives had to invent alternative ways to distribute their productions.

Existing outside television schedules and movie theaters, early French video tended to circulate in the context of local public debates, and at feminist or union meetings, where it was typically used as a pretext to engage participants in discussion, and to bring more voices into the debate. At first, the audience of early video was the users of video itself and those who had been recorded, as well as their close neighbors, either victims of or militants for socio-political struggles. As a result, its first viewers were already informed, compassionate, and engaged with various causes. However, as Duguet explains, collectives quickly developed guerilla strategies in the streets. For example, a popular distribution tactic used by early videomakers to reach a larger audience was called "Diffusion à la brouette" ("Wheelbarrow Distribution").<sup>54</sup> This was a portable video station for outdoor broadcast, using a VCR and a television monitor, and could quickly be moved in case of police intervention. These spontaneous and somewhat performative street screenings tended to take place in public squares on market days. The controversial

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<sup>54</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 61.

character of the issues raised by these videos, and the intrusive character of the outdoor screening mode, were intended to engage passersby during their daily routine. In addition, Fargier explains that, on a few occasions, members of collectives also managed to pirate the television network in Paris by installing illegal antennae to broadcast independent content, and to disturb the evening news at 8 PM. Fargier even described an attempted pirate television broadcast organized by Paul Roussopoulos, which operated from the top of a building near Montparnasse train station in Paris.<sup>55</sup>

The Roussopoulos' also conceived an ingenious distribution method for their video *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent* ("The Prostitutes from Lyon Speak"), produced with Video Out in 1975 (Fig. 18). The subject of this video was the first strike by prostitutes in France, which took place in Lyon that year.<sup>56</sup> In the video, the women denounce the government's hostility towards them: insults and aggression from the police, imprisonments, fines and state taxation (a popular slogan among prostitutes at the time was "L'Etat Proxénète!", "The State is a Pimp"). In Lyon, street workers found refuge in the local church of Saint-Nizier, which they occupied with the help of the minister. In *Les prostituées*, Carole Roussopoulos returns to her preferred format of

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<sup>55</sup> Fargier, interview with Yaël Mandelbaum and Julien Marant, *Surpris par la nuit*.

<sup>56</sup> Also in 1975, the collective Vidéa created *Millett parle de la prostitution avec des féministes* ("Millett Speaks about Prostitution with Feminists"), another video addressing the same prostitutes' strike in Lyon. The video shows the well-known North American activist and feminist writer Kate Millett (author of *The Prostitution Papers*, 1971, a diary of women and prostitutes) speaking about the strikers with a group of French feminists (including Wittig and Delphy). The core of their conversation concerns the position that feminists should adopt in regard to prostitution; Millett's message is to blame prostitution rather than prostitutes and focus on creating, instead of separation, a women's sisterhood for solidarity amongst women, prostitutes being ultimately also struggling women.

the video-portrait, allowing her subjects to describe the motives that brought them into prostitution and to explain their daily lives as sex workers, women and mothers. Yet the Roussopoulos' also departed from traditional video distribution methods here by giving special attention to the video's immediate audience. As Carole recalled, what was videotaped each morning was shown in the afternoon on four or five monitors hanging on the façade of the church, which were connected to VCRs inside; in this way the women could speak to the street without being arrested by the police.<sup>57</sup> Footage of these transmissions was then integrated into the final production, showing a crowd, mostly male, possibly composed of clients and pimps, along with other male and few female bystanders, surprised by what is shown on the screens (Fig. 19). The viewers look stunned and speechless: not only have they learnt that prostitutes' concerns are, in many respects, similar to those of many other women, citizens and tax payers, but also they are confronted with a debate on an issue as taboo as prostitution taking place in the public space. Commenting on this installation, Duguet notes:

These strange prosthetic screens inserted into a sacred architecture are symbolic wound uncovering suffering and humiliation [...]. The screen shows but denies access, it separates and at the same time confronts. In addition, the feeling of live action that challenges the audience even more is accentuated by the actual presence of the prostitutes behind these walls. Occupation of the church, occupation of the small screen.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Marchiori, "Interview with Carole Roussopoulos," 48.

<sup>58</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 56. My translation. The small screen, "petit écran", refers to television or to its monitor, in comparison to the big screen of cinema ("grand écran").

In other words, the potency of this work derives not just from the strength of the interviews, but from its mode of displays on the façade of the church, dramatizing the line between presence and absence, public and private.

What makes a project like *Les prostituées* exemplary of early French video is the inventiveness of its display and the immediacy of its research, reducing the delay between realization and distribution. This illustrates the main goal and status of early video by women's collectives, which was conceived as a means of direct and instantaneous expression and communication on current issues. Accordingly, Carole Roussopoulos insisted on categorizing her video production as a "video-tract", as opposed to its current classification as documentary. (Today, militant videos by women's collectives can most often be seen at festivals of documentary film.) Duguet suggests that documentary-related practices in cinema and television from the 1960s (Direct Cinema, Ethnographic Cinema, Television Documentary, "Reality" Television and "Ecriture par l'Image") potentially influenced the stylistic development of militant video. In interviews, however, Carole Roussopoulos denies any prior knowledge of independent and experimental cinema or documentary practices when she started in video in the early 1970s, and denies its stylistic influence upon her work.<sup>59</sup>

However, by comparison with other documentaries, these videos did not comment upon, judge or correct the sitter; they did not seek objectivity in the position presented, but were partial, aiming to become the sitter's most direct and immediate line of expression. Reinforcing this is

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<sup>59</sup> Duguet, "Ecrire en vidéo," 110.

the fact that a significant quantity of early French videos has been lost: the tapes were recorded over after being broadcast, which underlines the extent to which they sought to provoke an immediate reaction in the present rather than becoming a meaningful document for the future. In fact, within the women's movement, video represented only one means of expression and action alongside others; photography, writing, songwriting and slogan-writing were amongst the most popular, because of their immediacy. The closest analogy to this use of early video is radio, especially the use made of it in France during May 68.<sup>60</sup> In his book, *La prise de parole* ("The Capture of Speech", 1968), philosopher and sociologist Michel de Certeau analyzes the popular uprising that happened earlier that same year, when political information was independently and immediately broadcast via transistors, during the events of May. This took place at a moment when the French government had shut down its entire public television system, in an attempt to keep it under control, but when radio continued airing:

For the demonstrators, the transistor was information carried on one's person. It furnished the power to "dominate the movement" instead of being lost in it. It also became confused with the event since it allowed it to be *done* at the same time that it was *saying* so. Finally, it turned the actors into heroes at the very instant when it offered to each person the means for controlling information on the spot and choosing one's course of action.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> For more information on radio and the content broadcast during May 1968, see Evelyne Sullerot, "Transistors et barricades," *Ce n'est qu'un début*, ed. Philippe Labro (Paris: éditions et publications premières, 1968), 124-47.

<sup>61</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, translated by Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 50. Originally published as *La prise de parole: pour une nouvelle culture* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1968), 138.

According to de Certeau, the transistor radio in this context became fully instrumental in what he called the “capture of speech”: self-expression, affirmation and emancipation realized within action. This concept equally applies to early video by women’s collectives.

In conclusion, video became the privileged medium for women’s collectives in France in the 1970s. In video they found an efficient tool for liberation and self-representation, as well as an independent medium with which they could attack discrimination and practice counter-information, raising awareness of topics ignored by other media. It was also an emulatory practice, whose inventiveness, along with its dynamic and uplifting overtones, sought to empower viewers, especially women, and invited them to engage in social mobilization and political action. At the same time, militant video was above all a demagogic exercise that used the screen to deliver a unilateral socio-political message to be received by a viewer, who was envisioned as a female political subject.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FRED FOREST: EARLY WORKS. NEW MEDIA EXPLORATIONS AND ART SOCIOLOGIQUE (1967-75)

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the French artist Fred Forest developed a diversity of applications for video as a medium for screen-based video works and installations. Forest's explorations of the potential of video as a new medium is more diverse and complex than the straightforward use of the camera to record interviews and convey a socio-political message – as described in the previous chapter's review of video production by militant women's collectives, which developed during the same years. Forest was also a pioneer of many forms of new media to develop installations using television (1969), VCR (1969), satellite (1969), fax machine (1970), answering machine (1972) and telephone (1972). Forest's use of the telephone as a medium attracted the attention of Marshall McLuhan who, in 1973, dedicated a short text to the artist.<sup>1</sup> McLuhan points out that Forest's use of the phone insists on its ability to allow visualization (of the person heard but physically absent) and to experience ubiquity (a distortion of space and time, the immediacy of the voice but the spatial distance between the subjects in conversation). McLuhan's text is frequently reproduced in Forest's publications, and is a trophy

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "Uncle Fred is Here! Fred Forest and the Telephone (1973)," in ed. Forest, *Art sociologique. Vidéo*, 126-27. This text is also available on the Web Net Museum, [http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/textes\\_critiques/auteurs/mac\\_luhan\\_en.htm#text](http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/textes_critiques/auteurs/mac_luhan_en.htm#text) (accessed July 20, 2010).

in the artist's bibliography. In the 1980s Forest conceived works with computer (1983) and Minitel (1984), a domestic electronic appliance resulting from the marriage of television and computer terminal, developed in France by the P.T.T., the National Mailing and Telecommunication Company in 1982. The technology used in the Minitel was known as Telematics, a combination of telecommunications and computer sciences.<sup>2</sup> More recently, in the 1990s, Forest has worked extensively with the Internet, exploring virtual reality beyond the screen. On the Internet for example, Forest has sold virtual works of art (1996), married to numeric artist Sophie Lavaud (1999), and created various events on *Second Life*, the popular 3D virtual world accessible through Internet. His Web Net Museum, a site Forest founded and copyrighted, is one of the first known artist's Websites, created in 1991.<sup>3</sup> These recent works, however, will only briefly be mentioned in this chapter, which focuses more essentially on Forest's early works and their historical significance.

Forest claims to be the first artist using video in France, as early as 1967. However, there are discrepancies in the dating of his earliest videos which were made either in 1967 (according

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<sup>2</sup> The term "telematics" refers to the Nora-Minc Report on "The Computerization of Society or Telematics" (1978), an administrative report commissioned by French President Giscard d'Estaing in 1976, with a view to evaluating the potentials and dangers of computerizing the French economy and society. This report was subsequently published in a pocket book format and became a best-seller even at the time of its publication. The Minitel was also a national intranet system developed in France as a rival to the Internet, and remained in use as an interactive database throughout the 1980s, primarily as a national electronic phonebook; its use started declining in the 1990s with the development of Internet access. The same governmental program resulted in the introduction, in 1981, of computers in French public schools, which allowed a new generation to be familiarized with the computer technology to come.

<sup>3</sup> See Web Net Museum, <http://www.webnetmuseum.org> (accessed June 27, 2010).

to the artist) or, more convincingly, in 1969 (according to most documents on his early videos); the latter date is the one that will be preferred in this research – even though, there are dates 1973 (*La cabine téléphonique*) and 1974 (*Le mur d'Arles*) mentioned at the beginning of the copies kept in Forest's archives at INA (National Institute for Audiovisual), which the artist claims were realized in 1967. Forest maintains that he obtained his first video camera before it was available on the French market in fall 1967, after negotiating a free camera and tapes from the management of Sony France, and in exchange for offering to experiment with it for the company.<sup>4</sup> Yet if Forest did obtain this equipment in 1967, it is surprising that he didn't use it to record the events of May 68, when he reportedly participated in the popular uprisings and general assemblies at the Sorbonne and Théâtre de l'Odéon. In fact, if film was used during May 1968 to report and document the uprising, it is striking that there were no videos produced on this topic in France.<sup>5</sup> Since Forest's earliest videos were not exhibited until much later, there is no other way to evaluate the date when he actually started using his video camera for artistic production. These discrepancies aside, Forest is nevertheless one of the first artists to use this new technology anywhere in the world.

Like the feminist collectives making militant video, Forest showed a consistent concern in his artistic practice for socio-political matters, in contrast to the more formal use of video contemporaneously developed in the US, for example by Peter Campus and Bruce Nauman.

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<sup>4</sup> Information regarding the conditions in which he obtained his first video camera are from Fred Forest, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 23, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Kristin Ross provides a list of films created during and on the topic of May 68. See Ross, *May '68*, 230-1.

Like feminist militant video, Forest's insistence on acting outside of art institutional spaces in order to reach a larger audience, beyond those already interested in art, also allows his work to be seen as a form of institutional critique. However, he differs in his ability to infiltrate the mass media: although he questions its content as well as its ideological motivations, he is singular in managing also to use its strategies and, on occasion, to occupy its spaces parasitically. Despite the impression of discontinuity created by Forest's promiscuous use of different media, a linking thread throughout all his projects is an attention to interactivity and viewer participation. Using different technological means and various levels of network communication, Forest envisioned inventive ways for the viewer to interact with the work, in sharp contrast to militant video's unilateral relationship between the viewer and the screen, described in the previous chapter. This chapter therefore aims to construct an art historical narrative for Forest, by asking the following questions: What made new media appropriate for experimenting with viewer interaction and participation? How can we best characterize the viewer/screen relationship devised by Forest for his audience? How did the artist communicate socio-political positions through his work? Finally, if the purpose of interactivity is to model social relations, then what model does Forest's work suggest or generate?

## **1. Background**

“Agitator”, “maverick” and “pirate” are some of the adjectives used by both the media and specialized art press when describing Fred Forest. Despite his participation in the 1970s in the three major international artistic events for contemporary art at the time (the 1973 São Paulo

Bienal, the 1976 Venice Biennale, and Documenta 6, 1977), Forest remains a peripheral figure in the French art scene, who is also not well known in the Anglophone context. Forest's status might constitute an example of what Branden Joseph has called, in reference to Tony Conrad, a "Minor History".<sup>6</sup> Forest is indeed rarely mentioned in the literature on contemporary French art. Millet mentions him only briefly in relation to his involvement in the Collectif d'art sociologique and their pedagogical approach towards the audience.<sup>7</sup> Duguet also briefly mentioned his work, in her chapter "L'art vidéo", but she gives far more attention to Nam June Paik and Jean-Christophe Averty.

A quick glance at his biography reveals that his career has been punctuated with rebellious episodes, and even a familiarity with the legal system that he has used to achieve direct attacks against artistic institutions. This eccentricity also explains, in part, the disinterest in his work that art professionals as well as institutions have hitherto shown. In October 1973, for example, he was arrested by military police in Brazil for organizing a street action at the 12<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Bienal, discussed later in this chapter. Then his participation in the 1976 Venice Biennale, with the Collectif d'art sociologique, was defiant: failing to secure funding for their original proposal, which involved revealing the ecologically damaging side of Venice's industrial cityscape, the collective decided to install an "Information Desk" about their aborted project in

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<sup>6</sup> See Brandon W. Joseph, "What is a Minor History?" *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Art after Cage (A "Minor" History)*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 11-58.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Millet, "Pedagogical Leanings," in *Contemporary Art in France*, trans. Penwarden (2006), 185-8. Duguet, "L'art vidéo: Communication-information," *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 180 and 213-5.

one of the wings of the French Pavilion. Forest insists that it was the political nature of the project that discouraged funding from the French government:

Our project was disturbing for those in charge of culture at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs [...]. It was not a politically correct project since it created a critical relationship between the idealized Venice and the industrialized one, which also has deplorable ecological repercussions for the city's future. Our project lacked the elegance of a position suitable for the French diplomacy to present us as official representative artists.<sup>8</sup>

Provocatively titled *Bombardando Venezia*, the project symbolically “bombed” the city of Venice with images, representing the city's desolate industrial suburbs, projected onto the luxurious facades of traditional Venetian palazzi. The project included surveys completed by Venetian inhabitants sharing their views on the social, economic, political, and ecological future of their city. It must be noted that, in 1976, the Biennale's organizers had announced their intention to be politically disengaged; they wanted to avoid the mistakes of the highly politicized 1974 edition, organized around the theme “For a Democratic and Anti-Fascist Culture”, which had triggered numerous protests.<sup>9</sup> With Pierre Restany, curator of that year's pavilion, they decided to organize informal artists' discussions, which were envisaged as live actions in front of the Pavilion; everything was recorded on video. Taking advantage of the international crowds of artists and visitors at the Biennale, the discussions tackled the tendentious question of institutional support for artists and their relationship to national affiliation. Among the illustrious participants in these debates was Joseph Beuys, representing Germany in the Biennale. As it is

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Forest, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 23, 2010. My translation.

<sup>9</sup> See Pascaline Costa de Beauregard, “Protest and Innovation in Italy. The Great Exhibitions,” *Education and Culture*, no. 30 (Spring-Summer 1976): 34-7.

often the case with Forest's early videos, the sound is often mute; Beuys's near thirty-minute monologue is totally silent.<sup>10</sup>

Forest's notoriety as an agitator in the art world is further demonstrated by a series of lawsuits he has pursued against art institutions in Switzerland and in France. For example, he engaged in a thirteen-year court case (1978-91) against the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts of Lausanne and the Canton of Vaud regarding the loss of one his pieces, *La maison de vos rêves* ("The House of your Dreams", 1978). The piece in question comprised around a hundred original letters of correspondence between the artist and readers of the daily Swiss newspapers *La Tribune* and *Le Matin*. These were collected during a media action conducted by the artist and exhibited as his work, but were carelessly discarded in the trash by the museum's employees.<sup>11</sup> From 1994 to 1997, Forest engaged in another lawsuit against the Centre Pompidou for abuse of power over the institution's refusal to disclose the acquisition price of Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings. A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), a landmark of institutional critique as a result of being censored at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, in 1971. Following his lawsuit, Forest published a book that expanded

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<sup>10</sup> Beuys was already familiar with the use of conversation as medium for artistic live actions and had experimented with this at Documenta 5, 1972, with the *Bureau for Direct Democracy*: a continual discussion with visitors about his idea of direct democracy. See Joseph Beuys and Dirk Schwarze, "Report on a Day's Proceedings at the *Bureau for Direct Democracy* (1972)," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 120-4.

<sup>11</sup> See Fred Forest, "Ma Guerre contre la Suisse/L'Œuvre perdue," *Forest: 100 Actions*, 122-3. Harald Szeemann also wrote a text on this affair: Szeemann, "The Lost Work of Fred Forest or the Lawsuit as Pretext for Artistic Creation (1992)," in *Forest: 100 Actions*, 25. This text is also accessible at [http://webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/textes\\_critiques/auteurs/szeemann\\_jan1992\\_en.htm#text](http://webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/textes_critiques/auteurs/szeemann_jan1992_en.htm#text) (accessed March 25, 2012).

upon this experience and criticized French institutions and cultural policy.<sup>12</sup> Forest's argument was that the Centre Pompidou is a public institution, funded with taxpayers' money, so the price paid for the acquisition should be in the public domain. In addition, he created a polemic by revealing a contradiction in Haacke's work, questioning his true commitment to institutional critique, while selling his works at high prices worldwide to the same institutional system that he attacked. Sociologist Nathalie Heinich has written about this contradiction in Haacke's position and refers to Forest as pointing out this same paradox in his lawsuit over the work's price.<sup>13</sup> Although this may sound like taking a point of principle to legalistic extremes, it is typical of Forest's method in developing a tension with and resistance towards his subject, be this another artist, an institution, the media or the social fabric more generally.

Forest actually presents his artistic role as one of critical *animateur* ("stimulator" or "entertainer") – a term more commonly used in the context of socio-cultural community-based projects. He is also one of the first artists to present himself as a service provider:

Yesterday, the artist worked directly on physical matter, he was a sort of craftsmen involved with materials, let's say that he was an "object maker". In the way I engage with art, there is a shift of the artist's status to become a "service provider". [...] The organization of society in social layers has shown that the conversion of the manual workers into the so-called "white collar" workers has grown exponentially at a specific moment. Considering the innovative nature of

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Forest, *Fonctionnement et dysfonctionnement de l'art contemporain: un procès pour l'exemple* (Paris: L'Harmattan), 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Nathalie Heinich, "Pierre Bourdieu et l'art contemporain," *Artension*, no. 6 (July 2002): 15. Also available on Magazine des Arts online, <http://www.magazinedesarts.com/wordpress/?p=93> (accessed June 12, 2011).

the artistic task I offer, I wonder to what extent, beyond my knowledge, I also participate in this general structural movement, which is that of a service economy.<sup>14</sup>

A typical work by Forest develops as service-based art and involves creating the conditions for human exchange within a structure decided by the artist, and in which he positions himself as a participant-observer. Similar conceptions of service-based art have been expressed more contemporarily in the 1990s, the best example being Andrea Fraser.

Accordingly, Forest prefers to use the term “action” rather than “performance” to describe his works, since this conveys a sense of pro-activism, as well as corresponding to his aim to place the viewer in an active rather than passive relationship to his work. Forest explains that he started using the term “action” in 1969 when he was seeking to enlarge the audience involved in his work, and preferred this to “performance” since the latter was too closely associated with the field of contemporary art. Forest was familiar with performance in France, in 1974, just after the São Paulo Bienal, Forest met the French performance and body artist Michel Journiac to discuss their common interest in a sociological approach to art and Forest’s use of the term “Art sociologique” at the Bienal. Later that year, Forest and Journiac met with other artists, including Hervé Fischer, Bertrand Lavier, Gina Pane, and Jean-Paul Thenot, as well as François Pluchart, one of the main critics of Body Art, to discuss their possible association in a Collectif d’art sociologique. Ultimately, the artists and critic disagreed on their respective goals and

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<sup>14</sup> Abraham Moles, Fred Forest, “Réflexions en commun sur l’Art sociologique,” *Opus International*, no. 85 (Summer 1982): 47. My translation. Similar conceptions of service-based art have been expressed more contemporarily in the 1990s, the best example being Andrea Fraser, “What’s Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?,” *October*, no. 80, Spring 1997, 111–6.

interests, but a Collectif d'art sociologique was nevertheless formed, comprising Forest, Fischer and Thenot.<sup>15</sup> They co-signed the first “Manifeste d'Art sociologique”, which was published on October 10, 1974 in the national newspaper *Le Monde*. The Collectif d'art sociologique was active from 1974 to 1981. The word “action” is generally the preferred term for performance-based interventions in the Latin American and Eastern European art context, but it was also used in France throughout the 1960s and 70s. “Action” is present as a term in Guy Debord's writings, for example, as well as in that of Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), 1960-8. The term “action” was also central to Frank Popper's *Art – Action and Participation* in which he describes a new art made by and for all people, and which materializes less as an art object than as an event or a party.<sup>16</sup> Popper found most of his examples in Kinetic Art, which manifested an interest in viewer participation throughout the 1950s and 60s.

Restany, who has collaborated with Forest for over thirty years and regularly participated in his actions, is one of the few to locate the artist within a philosophical and socio-political context. As he explains:

Fred Forest joined the conversation of artistic questioning when [...] the industrialized Western world was undergoing a great structural crisis: May 68. Today, it is widely understood that May 68 was [...] an early symptom of radical change in society and in the [economic] system of production. During this time the meaning of communication changed, or rather, acquired a new consciousness

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<sup>15</sup> Fred Forest, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 23, 2010 and October 6, 2010. My translation.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Popper's *Art – Action and Participation* (London: Studio Vista, 1975).

of its territory, of its autonomy, of its ability to criticize and awaken virtues in society at large and in the broadest audience.<sup>17</sup>

De Certeau expressed similar ideas when he summarized May 68 as the “capture of speech” and recalled, “From this something unheard of was produced: we began to speak. It seemed as if it were for the first time. From everywhere emerged the treasures, either aslumber or tacit, of forever unspoken experiences.”<sup>18</sup> De Certeau enunciates the direct implications of the “capture of speech” for a context where elites and masses are divided: “And now the first implications of this initial invention are already put into action: the direct experience of democracy, the permanence of contestation, the need for critical thought, the legitimacy of a creative and responsible participation for everyone, and also the celebration of freedom – the power of the imagination and poetic festivities.”<sup>19</sup> These are the conditions, criteria and values that, it will be shown, are also present in Forest’s concept of artistic action and which allows Restany to compare Forest’s work to a “humanism for the masses”, the title of one of his articles on the artist.<sup>20</sup> As such, Forest shared a common agenda with the first generation of women who appropriated video in France, although they had different approaches. Both wanted to “give voice to people” and, in different ways continued to take into the 1970s some of the social ideals

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<sup>17</sup> Pierre Restany, “De l’Art sociologique à l’esthétique de la communication, un humanisme de masse (Paris, November 1994),” in *Forest: 100 Actions*, 55. This text is also accessible on the Web Net Museum, [http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/textes\\_critiques/auteurs/restany\\_nov1994\\_fr.htm#text](http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/textes_critiques/auteurs/restany_nov1994_fr.htm#text) (accessed August 14, 2010). My translation.

<sup>18</sup> De Certeau, *The Capture of Speech*, trans. by Conley (1997), 50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>20</sup> Restany, “Un humanisme de masse,” in *Forest: 100 Actions*, 55-8.

that had been envisioned and tested during May 68. Restany also notes that in Forest's work, the awakening that took place in 1968 was nourished above all by the understanding that communication should no longer be seen as a volume of data to send and receive, but rather as a tangible territory to appropriate, manipulate and criticize. This position contrasts with more widely spread ideas associated with communications theory, which was organized around the understanding of information as quantity; it emerged as a discipline in the 1950s and became popular throughout the 1960s as a study of human communication and behavior, as well as the analysis of mass communication. It has been central to Forest's understanding of the mass and the new media. As Forest noted in 1975:

The field of information that today represents a second life environment has always appeared to me as a privileged territory for intervention and study. The page of the newspaper, with its tight typographic tissue and its arbitrary juxtapositions of diverse signs, has always developed an imperious fascination for me; recognizing here, visualized on paper, the tangible translation of our new universe of mass communication.<sup>21</sup>

In order to explore and occupy the field of information as a territory, Forest made use of a large diversity of communicational technologies, which are often considered as non-artistic media in the visual arts. Christiane Paul, Adjunct Curator for New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, explains the difficulties Forest presents to the art institution in terms of his diverse use of media: "He did not become a video artist and stick to one medium, he

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<sup>21</sup> Fred Forest, "Art sociologique," *Opus International*, special issue (April 1975): 31. My translation.

always moved onto the next level of network communication [...]. It is one of the reasons why he remains an outsider”.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Early Screen Experiments (1967-9)

It is not insignificant that Forest comes from an atypical background for an artist. He was born Marcel Fred Forest in 1933, in Mascara, Algeria, a country where his family had lived for at least three generations and which he had to leave, in 1962, as part of the exodus following the country’s independence from France.<sup>23</sup> From 1954 to 1971 he worked for the PTT (Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphone), the French mail and telecommunications company, in Algeria and then in Paris. Critics often use this early professional experience to justify Forest’s interest in means of communication, as well as his practical and pragmatic approach to them. However, Forest was in Paris during May 68, and took part in protests at the Sorbonne and Théâtre de l’Odéon. By 1970, Forest was working as an illustrator for the *Combat*, a well-known leftist newspaper recognized for its support of the student and worker’s movements during May 68 (Fig. 20).

Forest is self-taught as an artist, which was a not uncommon circumstance in his generation of artists, active in the 1960s and early 1970s. When he began showing work in the

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<sup>22</sup> Transcription from the interview: “Christiane Paul on Fred Forest,” video-interview with Ruth Erickson and Titus Aguigah, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAMXfF0pOsw> (accessed December 26, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Fred Forest, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 23, 2010.

late 1960s, Forest initially thought of himself as a painter; he is first discussed as an artist in an article published in *Révolution africaine* in 1967, which reviewed a solo-exhibition of his drawings at the Centre Culturel Français of Algiers.<sup>24</sup> His style was initially rather broad in influence, deriving from both Art Informel and Figuration Narrative, and merged figuration and abstraction.<sup>25</sup> However, he quickly departed from this aesthetic to focus on a more technological and fantastical direction for his paintings, with machine-like motifs taking inspiration from Surrealism. When speaking about his early career as a painter, however, Forest admits that he was frustrated with the limitations presented by painting as a medium. He recalls his resistance to the authorial signature, a gesture he describes as the symbolic equivalent of killing a work: closing or terminating it by taking away its capability to change, grow and integrate new information.<sup>26</sup>

Around the same period in France, other painters were calling authorship into question. In 1967, for example, the association B.M.P.T. (an acronym created from the first letters of its members' last names: Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni)

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<sup>24</sup> "Fred Forest au Centre Culturel Français," *Révolution africaine* 212 (March 1967), n.p.

<sup>25</sup> Art Informel emerged in France in the early 1950s and sought to create a warm, intuitive and gestural abstraction that contrasted with the cold geometric tendencies that dominated the previous decades. Informel artists rejected the use of predetermined structures and instead defended the value of a Surrealist-inspired automatism. Figuration Narrative, by contrast, was a trend of figurative painting trend began in France in the early 1960s as a French counterpart to American Pop Art. It also focused on contemporary society and pop cultural imagery, but differed in its socio-political themes (support for the Cuban revolution, criticism of American imperialism and the Vietnam War, and, closer to home, of Georges Pompidou's cultural policy).

<sup>26</sup> Fred Forest, interview with the author, Paris, July 28, 2009.

developed a series of collective manifestations in which each artist developed and repeated a pictorial sign: vertical bands for Buren, circles for Mosset, horizontal lines for Parmentier, and paintbrush marks for Toroni (Fig. 21). Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni identified themselves as an “association” of artists in contrast to a “collective” or “group”; as an association, each member was entitled his own individual practice or pictorial sign that they then brought together during collective manifestations.<sup>27</sup> B.M.P.T. interrogated authorship through the negation of traditional notions of personal style in painting. However, at the end of 1967, after their fourth and last manifestation at the Fifth Paris Biennial, the association of artists started falling apart, paradoxically over disagreements about Buren’s proposal to realize an exhibition that would involve the artists signing each other’s works. Resisting this total refutation of authorship, Parmentier left the association and, in December 1967, Buren, Mosset and Toroni worked on an exhibition at Gallery J. in Paris, in which they signed each other’s paintings. Then, pushing the envelope even further, Buren and Toroni collaborated on a project in Lugano (Switzerland) that same month, which involved offering viewers the opportunity to realize the artists’ paintings.<sup>28</sup> Central to B.M.P.T.’s reflections on authorship was the idea of painting’s autonomy; the artists’ objective was to produce a painting freed from anything but its own

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<sup>27</sup> French artists involved with Relational Aesthetics in the 1990s also showed an interest in organizations like B.M.P.T. that functioned as an artists’ association. In 1995, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno and Xavier Veilhan founded the *Association des temps libérés* (“Association of Freed Times”), a non-profit organization for artists, discussed in Chapter Four. Pierre Huyghe, who initiated this project, often references B.M.P.T. as his model.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Claura, “Buren, Mosset, Toroni, or Anybody,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Blake Stimson and Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT, 1999), 30-1. This text discusses the concept of authorship practiced by B.M.P.T.

existence as painting. During their first performance at the Salon de la Jeune Peinture, in January 2, 1967, using a recording in three languages, they arrogantly addressed the audience with the message “B.M.P.T. advise you to become intelligent”, and during their fourth and last manifestation in September 1967, an amplified voice-over declared, “Painting starts with Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni”. Picking up on these ideas, the group Supports/Surfaces (1969-72) developed similar positions regarding de-authored painting without a subject, arguing that the object of painting was painting itself. Along with B.M.P.T., Supports/Surfaces believed in painting’s autonomy as a production that does not integrate personal references to the artist and which resists the viewer’s mental and affective projections.

#### **a. *Tableaux-écrans* and Multimedia Environment**

Forest’s frustration with painting came out of the limitations that he experienced with that medium. However, instead of reducing painting to its internal components, as B.M.P.T. or Supports/Surfaces were doing, he attempted to expand painting’s potentiality by associating it with other media, at first with slide projections. This resulted in a series of works called *Tableaux-écrans* (“Painting-Screens”) that Forest initiated in 1967 and produced until 1969 (Fig. 22). The French language makes a distinction between “tableau” and “peinture”, which are both translated as “painting” in English. Here, Forest refers to the “tableau” as a practical term for painting that suggests its materiality as an opaque surface or panel (the frame, the canvas and the paint applied onto it). This is in contrast to “peinture” which refers to a medium or more

abstractly to a work of art. This choice of word confirms that Forest viewed his *Tableaux-écrans* as based in paintings as a surface for projection, with the painting itself becoming a screen.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Tableaux-écrans*, a slideshow is projected onto the painted canvas, which become a screen functioning as a surface for light projections. The paintings that Forest uses as screens for his *Tableaux-écrans* are relatively personal in style; they suggest a kind futuristic and mechanical aesthetics rendered according to figurative or abstract models. As for the projections, these are random in content, but mainly showing incomplete and unclear sentences and partially burnt slides. The projections are thus visual and linguistic information, and serve as a stimulus added to the painting. Set into motion with a slide carousel, this newly added content allows the work to change continuously. As a consequence, the *Tableaux-écrans* allow painting to become a time-based medium. (Around the same period, Tony Conrad collaborated with La Monte Young and others in multimedia installations using projections of slides and videos onto paintings, as in *Dream House*, 1969.) What is important here is not the painting alone nor the slide projections, but the encounter between the two in real-time. In exhibitions, the *Tableaux-écrans* were arranged so that the Sigma or Kodak carousels were visible and part of the installation. To an extent, this was part of a broader effort at that time to reveal the central place of technology and desacralize painting; because the light is dimmed to allow the slide projections, the shadows of viewers circulating in the space also fall onto the painted screens;

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<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately the *Tableaux-écrans* do not belong to any public or private collection, so they are rarely seen and only known through installation shots, such as at those of the Salon International de l'Audiovisuel, Porte de Versailles, in 1971.

this makes visitors part of the installation and more aware of their own presence and that of the work.

The *Tableaux-écrans* offered a degree of open-endedness that contrasted with the clear message communicated at the same period by militant video; through the work, the artist conveyed no socio-political position, and the viewer was left free to speculate upon possible meanings. This interest in involving the viewer in the formulation of the work's meaning prefigures more recent art associated with Relational Aesthetics in the 1990s, a central criticism of which has been the apolitical status of its open-endedness. When they were created, however, Forest's *Tableaux-écrans* evoked the "Open Work", a category of artistic practice identified by Umberto Eco in 1962, which he used to describe the significance of electronic and aleatory music (Luciano Berio, Henri Pousseur and Pierre Boulez), modern art (Alexander Calder), informal painting, and modern literature (Stéphane Mallarmé and James Joyce).<sup>30</sup> According to Eco, an "Open Work" is characterized by its formal and structural openness and a semantic open-endedness, both of which allow many possible configurations and interpretations to be formulated by the viewer/reader. An "Open Work" comprises tactics of participation; it appeals to the viewer's initiative and anticipates a response, which in some instances is necessary for the work to be completed. Forest admits to a fervent interest in Eco's idea of the "open work", but insists he had no knowledge of it until after he created his *Tableaux-écrans*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiano, 1962), 1-23.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Forest, interview with the author, Paris, July 28, 2009.

Just a couple of years after he created his first *Tableaux-écrans*, and clearly directly inspired by them, Forest conceived *Interrogation 69*, a multimedia installation and sound environment realized in collaboration with Luc Ferrari. Ferrari (1929-2005) was a pioneer of *Musique concrète*, a form of electro-acoustic music that uses recorded and found sounds in addition to voices, and met John Cage, Edgard Varèse and Karlheinz Stockhausen in the mid-1950s, all of whom worked with electronic music and chance procedures. In the early 1960s, Ferrari collaborated with Pierre Schaeffer, which led him to use the first portable tape recorder available in France to collect street sounds for his musical compositions. At this time, Ferrari also worked at the Service de la Recherche of the ORTF, where for a short period he even directed the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM, 1960-3).<sup>32</sup> This allowed him occasionally to broadcast some of his musical compositions on French television, as well as to develop a series of television programs, *Les grandes répétitions*, dedicated to contemporary music.

This partnership between the two artists took place in May 1969, at the Gallery Sainte-Croix in Tours (a provincial city in central France) where the gallery was located in a disused church; this inspired the project's subtitle "Electronic Mass in a Gothic Chapel", and the artists' claim to bridge "knowledge of the past and that of the present." An exhibition catalogue was published for the occasion and contains a text by economist Georges ElGozy.<sup>33</sup> Playing with the

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<sup>32</sup> See Luc Ferrari's official website, <http://www.lucferrari.org/> (accessed August 8, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Georges ElGozy, *Interrogation 69* (Tours: Galerie Sainte-Croix, 1969). A project description and installation views are available in Fred Forest, "Interrogation 69," *Forest: 100 Actions*, 82. This material is also accessible on the Web Net Museum, [http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/01\\_en.htm#text](http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/01_en.htm#text) (accessed August 14, 2010).

idea of a space-time collapse in which past and present coexisted, the artists used the traditional acoustics of Gothic vaulting to house a multimedia and electro-acoustical installation using up to date technology. On the opening night, Luc Ferrari gave a live electronic music performance on atypical instruments including a satellite, computer, audio-recorder and sound editing-table. This performance accompanied a series of Forest's *Tableaux-écrans* with slide projections, as well as a light installation synchronized with the live sound performance (Fig. 23). Forest adjusted ramps of spotlights at the bottom of his paintings, which switched on and off according to variations in the treble and bass; this resulted in temporarily blocking the slideshow and exposing the paintings without projections.<sup>34</sup> The series of *Tableaux-écrans* shown in *Interrogation 69* used slides from two distinctive groups of images. One was a series of photographs taken by Forest and Ferrari at the site of the nuclear reactor in Saclay, near Paris, which aimed to bring the viewer's attention to the country's ecological future. In 1952, one of the first Nuclear Research Centers opened in France at Saclay; it was equipped with a nuclear pile, an early type of nuclear reactor. Forest and Ferrari's project took place in the context of growing anti-nuclear protests throughout the 1960s; this decade had been marked by the expansion of French nuclear capacity with the creation of numerous nuclear plants to develop domestic energy.<sup>35</sup> The other set of slides used in the installation comprised casual photographs commissioned by Forest and Ferrari, who asked a professional photographer – identified only as

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<sup>34</sup> Information collected from Fred Forest, interview with the author, Paris, July 28, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> In the 1970s, Jean-Paul Fargier and Danielle Jaeggi developed an approach to video that focused on nuclear development in France, which was known as Art écologique.

Mr. Libert – to document the artists going about their everyday life, at home and in the streets of the Quartier Latin, the dynamic student neighborhood in Paris.

As if the complexity of the live performance, slideshow, and lighting system was not enough, Forest also incorporated the viewer's real-time feedback into the musical production. A closed-circuit video installation "simultaneously broadcast, in real-time on three television monitors, the image of the viewers participating in the action. The television screens were arranged next to one another onto a white surface, which also displayed an invitation for the viewer to participate in the project".<sup>36</sup> A central ambition of Forest and Ferrari's project was to heighten the viewer's sense of his or her own presence in the installation: viewers were encouraged to participate in the work and add their own voices and/or image to the sonic and visual environment. Occurring only a year after the events of May 68, *Interrogation 69* took an unexpected turn when the exhibition became a meeting place for groups of people – mostly local artists and students – to engage in debates about the conditions of cultural production in Tours.

Forest recalls:

The cultural and artistic context in Tours was the very traditional setting of a provincial city. When the exhibition became a meeting place for discussions with local artists, I saw an opportunity, which had not been anticipated, to engage in discussions about local cultural policy and the difficulty of getting young people to engage in a culture they no longer identify with. Scheduled meetings were organized on specific themes decided by local artists (Alain Snyers or Peter Valentiner) and with students from the Université de Tours (especially with those studying sociology with Jean Duvignaud, who also participated in the discussions).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fred Forest, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 30, 2010. My translation.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

Duvignaud (1921-2007) was a professor in Sociology at the University of Tours; an author of numerous novels and sociology publications, he was known also for collaborating with Paul Virilio and Georges Perec on the creation of the journal *Cause commune* in 1972. According to Forest, these discussions focused on French cultural policy and cultural centralization in the late 1960s, when cultural support was concentrated in Paris at the expense of other French regions. However, no video or photographic documentation exists of the meetings and conversations with artists and students that took place during the exhibition in Tours.

These early examples not only show Forest's interest in integrating new technologies into the visual arts, but his desire to use audio-visual and communication technologies in order to engage the viewer's active participation. They also prefigure Forest's growing concern for increasing access to contemporary art for a larger audience, beyond those already familiar with it.

#### **b. First Sociological Animation: *L'Haÿ-les-Roses***

In 1967, working in parallel to the creation of his *Tableaux-écrans*, Forest realized *Portrait de famille* ("Family Portrait"), an unassuming but nevertheless significant project undertaken in collaboration with the Cultural Center of L'Haÿ-les-Roses, in the suburb of Paris, where the artist lived at the time. *Portrait de famille* was the artist's first sociological "animation" and prefigured a type of artistic action based on audience participation that Forest went on to develop throughout the 1970s and 80s. *Portrait de famille* took place over two

months (May and June 1967) in a housing project known as “La vallée du renard”. This *unité d’habitation* comprised three towers, each fourteen stories high, in addition to thirteen low-rise buildings and a commercial mall; it contained a total of 2,619 residents, including Forest himself. Because the artist was also living at L’Haÿ-les-Roses, he was aware of the local conditions and the level of social isolation that the residents characteristically experienced in housing projects, “La vallée du renard” being no exception. His aim with *Portrait de famille* was to fight against the residents’ lack of social and cultural exposure, and to encourage them to form a cultural community at L’Haÿ-les-Roses. Forest’s *Portrait de Famille* recalls contemporaneous projects by the British artist Stephen Willats, who engaged the residents of four housing projects in London throughout the 1970s. Like Forest, the artist asked residents to participate in a work of art that asked them to reflect on their lived environment, and to envision its re-modeling.

Forest’s project at “La vallée du renard” asked the inhabitants to produce a photographic family portrait of themselves that he would collect and then exhibit. The artist’s instructions recommended that the family portrait should preferably be taken at the dinner table – a symbol of social interaction and family cohesion – in the intimacy of their own apartments. This action produced private portraits in convivial settings that contrasted with the social coldness and distance existing between the residents living in the housing project (Fig. 24). Forest’s project description reads as follows:

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, between 9-11 PM, 700 flyers were placed in the mailboxes of residents at ‘La vallée du renard.’ Under the title *Family Portrait*, the flyers invited the residents to realize a family portrait. During the three following weeks, the artist would circulate, in person, from door-to-door, in order to collect these [family] photographs. In lieu of realizing a photograph specifically for the project, the artist would also accept any

documents that the residents cared to give him. [...] Then, during his door-to-door visits of the resident's apartments, and upon agreement with the participants, Forest would also take Polaroid photographs of them, in their apartment, around the family table.<sup>38</sup>

Forest's immediate goal was to amass a collection of residents' portraits to be publically displayed in various exhibitions – firstly in the Central Lobby of the housing project, then at the Cultural Center of L'Haÿ-les-Roses, and finally at the *Salon Comparaison*, a juried exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris – to which the residents were also invited and where they were expected to socialize with one another. According to Forest, the announcement that the family portraits would be shown in exhibition venues ensured a high level of participation.<sup>39</sup>

A project such as *Portrait de famille* questioned traditional notions of authorship, comprising contributions from viewer-participants that were then exhibited by the artist as his own work. Forest conceived the participants in his project as co-authors, but acknowledged that

[...] it would be somewhat demagogic and misleading to pretend that the participants in the project should be fully considered as artists. The author does not disappear altogether; he is the single creator of the system that generates the piece and the only one who pushes the project toward its realization. The participants are present as producers of a quasi-anonymous content, which is then visually arranged by the artist. Overall, it is still the artist who keeps control over the work of art!<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Fred Forest, "Action Urbaine: 'Portrait de famille,'" in *Forest: 100 Actions*, 81. My translation.

<sup>39</sup> Fred Forest, interview with the author, Paris, July 28, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Fred Forest, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 30, 2010. My translation.

*Portrait de famille* disturbed traditional hierarchy between artist and viewer: the audience is turned into participants, content-providers, and/or producers of the work. As for the project in its final form, this remained open and its success depended on the audience's willingness to contribute (and the quality of their contributions), even while Forest took responsibility for overall authorship.

### **c. Early Video Production**

In 1969, Forest began working with video in a way that also presaged the future development of his work. That year, he realized two black and white videos. The first, *La cabine téléphonique* ("The Public Phone Booth"), is an unedited 32-minute video recording of the street seen from Forest's third-floor apartment's window at L'Haÿ-les-Roses (Fig. 25). The video captures the activities of the quiet street and the mysterious routines of its pedestrians. The action is centered on a public phone booth, located in the middle of the block, which interests Forest as a technology of communication made publically available and a way to socially connect with others, at a distance. The second video is *Le Mur d'Arles* ("The Wall in Arles"), a 17-minute silent video that focuses on the behavior of passersby intrigued by a wooden fence built along a sidewalk in the city of Arles (Fig. 26). Forest describes his video as "a playful visual distraction about the curiosity of pedestrians in a busy street in Southern France. While walking along the sidewalk, they are irresistibly attracted by a mysterious event that seems to be happening on the

other side of the wooden fence”.<sup>41</sup> Both videos entertain a level of open-endedness and a sense of mystery emerging from simple human actions, allied with a lack of contextual information. The work is typical of Forest’s early video production in using the camera to observe insignificant aspects of everyday life, and to record human habits and social behaviors in order, perhaps, to make better sense of them. However, due to absence of opportunities for presenting these works, *La cabine téléphonique* and *Le Mur d’Arles* were never shown at the time of their creation, and were only exhibited much later in the artist’s career.<sup>42</sup> The documentary opportunism present in Forest’s early video recalls Nam June Paik’s 1965 recording of a taxi ride between the store where he just bought his first camera and his apartment in New York, which he then showed later that same evening at Café Go-Go. Nam June Paik considered this as his first video.

Forest’s first two videos are exception, as he rarely exclusively used video as a medium, but rather developed a diversity of applications for it, more commonly in association with other forms of artistic actions with the aim of recording and documenting them. *Grand Glacier, Montpellier*, for example, is a video resulting from an action that took place in 1972 at the Grand Glacier restaurant in the southern French city of Montpellier (Fig. 27). The action comprised the artist engaging in conversation with around thirty restaurant customers about their idea of what

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<sup>41</sup> Fred Forest, *Le Mur d’Arles*, [http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/59\\_02\\_en.htm#text](http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/en/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/59_02_en.htm#text) (accessed September 8, 2010). My translation.

<sup>42</sup> These early videos were exhibited during Forest’s US retrospective *Art and Society: The Work of Fred Forest* at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia, in 2007. Both videos are accessible in the INA Archives (BNF, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

constituted the recipe for happiness.<sup>43</sup> These unstaged conversations are close to the video-portrait in format, described in Chapter One as a characteristic of women's video collectives in the 1970s. Forest, however, wished his video to become a document for the future. *Grand Glacier* thus has a hybrid status as an artistic action and as performance documentation; as a video, it is a slice of everyday life, a "time capsule" of the early 1970s, telling us about ordinary people's lives and expectations.

Forest continued to develop projects involving video, including a body of work based on observations of the everyday life and on the theme of "professional gestures and gestures involved in social relationships", which was inspired by studies of gesture by Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-91). In 1977, Flusser's lectures "Les Gestes" were given at the Ecole d'Art d'Aix-en-Provence, and later published with Marc Partouche as *Les Gestes* (1999). Flusser collaborated with Forest on multiple projects and dedicated various articles to the artist over the next 10 years (1971-82), in which he both supported and criticized aspects of Forest's work.<sup>44</sup> This resulted in a series of videos including: *Les gestes du photographe* ("Gestures of the Photographer", 1972), *Gestes, Postures, et Mimiques* ("Gestures, Postures and Mimics", 1973),

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<sup>43</sup> Forest recently began a polemic about the precedence of his own conversation-based work for that of the internationally acclaimed young artist Tino Sehgal (born 1976). See "International News Digest." Artforum online, <http://artforum.com/news/week=201103> (accessed October 12, 2011). Quoting Sehgal, Forest recently created a new conversation piece out of a discussion he had with security personal at MoMA in New York, in September 2011, while attempting to develop an unauthorized performance in this institution. However, both artists show a very different approach to documentation: while Forest obsessively captures and collects everything, Sehgal refuses to permit any photographic or video documentation of his work.

<sup>44</sup> Vilém Flusser with Marc Partouche, *Les Gestes* (Paris: Editions Hors Commerce, 1999).

*Les gestes du professeur* (“Gestures of the Professor”, featuring Flusser, 1974), and *Les gestes du coiffeur* (“Gestures of the Hairdresser”, 1974) (Fig. 28).<sup>45</sup> The series uses video as a recording tool to analyze gesture, behavior and communication; it also involves a pertinent reflection on the extent to which these change as a result of the presence of the video camera itself. Around the same period, Forest created another significant project using video: *Vidéo – Troisième âge* (“Video – Third Age”) was developed in collaboration with Flusser, and with the assistance of sociologist Jean-Philippe Butaud, in a retirement facility in the French city of Hyères from June 25 to July 11, 1973 (Fig. 29).<sup>46</sup> This socio-educational project involved giving the video camera to elderly residents who, with the artist’s technical support, created their own productions communicating their lives and current hopes. This *action urbaine* helped the residents to formulate their own criticism of practical matters, such as the way the facility was organized and how it functioned, some of which were finally heard by the facility’s administration. This recalls a number of projects by militant video collectives, which on occasion gave the video camera to sitters in order to activate them as producers of their own content. It also recalls more recent work such as the socio-educational project *Tenantspin* (1999-2005) by the Danish collective Superflex (founded 1993). Based in a housing project in Liverpool, *Tenantspin* comprised an Internet television station run by tenants, many of whom were elderly (Fig. 30). Superflex provided technical infrastructure with the hope that the community would take charge of its own expression (as Superflex puts it, “*Tenantspin* is a voluntary project with

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<sup>45</sup> These videos are accessible in the INA Archives.

<sup>46</sup> For a full project description see Forest, *Art sociologique. Vidéo*, 75-6.

professional support”).<sup>47</sup> Although Superflex do not acknowledge Forest or women’s collectives as a precedent for their project, it shows the extent to which the use of video as a democratic medium, developed in France in the 1970s, is relevant to younger generations of socio-politically engaged artists and media activists in the 1990s and 2000s.

Forest’s interest and belief in sharing knowledge and education led him, throughout his career, to surround himself with intellectuals and scholars from different fields. This has commonly been interpreted as a strategy for him to validate his artistic practice, as Dominique Noguez and Liliane Touraine have claimed (I will return to their arguments below). In my view, this should be seen as part of Forest’s constant effort to work in collaboration. In 1972, he founded the association "Recherches et communication", which organized a series of public meetings at the Centre Albertus Magnus, in Paris. Among the many invited speakers were philosophers and sociologists Vilém Flusser, Paul Virilio, Jean Duvignaud and Edgar Morin (who worked with Roland Barthes in the 1960s); information theorist Abraham Moles (1920-92), and art historian René Berger. In 1985, Forest also completed a State Doctoral Thesis at La Sorbonne University on the topic of “Art sociologique et Esthétique de la communication” (“Sociological Art and Aesthetics of Communication”). His interdisciplinary defense committee was chaired by Abraham Moles and included philosopher Bernard Teyssède as advisor, historian of art and technology Frank Popper, Jean Duvignaud and novelist and historian of

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<sup>47</sup> *Tenantspin* project description on Superflex’s website, <http://www.tenantspin.org/> (accessed July 17, 2012).

cinema Dominique Noguez.<sup>48</sup> The entire defense was video recorded. The main criticism of the defense committee concerned Forest's inappropriate style of writing (too autobiographical and anecdotal); Noguez in particular questioned his need, as an artist, to obtain a doctorate degree – was he looking for the validation of his work by academia? This was undeniably Forest's intention and the purpose of his doctorate. On the one hand, it should be noted that the 1980s saw a revalorization of art education, with increasing numbers of artists graduating from art programs. On the other hand, it must be pointed out that education is a central concept in Forest's work, which often leans toward demagogy, and Millet is right to title her chapter on the activities of the Collectif d'art sociologique "Pedagogical Leanings".<sup>49</sup> In 1976, the collective founded the *École sociologique interrogative* ("Interrogative Sociological School") in the basement of Hervé Fischer's apartment. Not unlike Joseph Beuys's *Free International University* (1973-), this was conceived as a place for alternative cultural exchange. Artists, philosophers, sociologists, semiologists and art critics were invited to speak about the relationship between art, politics, society and the media. In fact, Forest's proposal to show the *École sociologique interrogative* at Documenta 6, in 1977, was rejected because Beuys had already planned to show *100 Days of the Free international University*. Instead, Forest presented *Vidéo – Troisième âge* (now held at the INA Archives).

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<sup>48</sup> For information and a discussion of Forest's dissertation defense see Galland, *Art sociologique*, 43-58. The video-recordings are available at INA.

<sup>49</sup> Millet, "Pedagogical Leanings," in *Contemporary Art in France*, trans. Penwarden (2006), 185-8.

### 3. Alternative Use of Media (1970s)

Mass media became a point of growing interest for Forest in the 1970s, an interest that was occasionally called into question by Flusser and Touraine (I will return to their arguments below). However, Forest's actions within the media allowed him to successfully reach the largest possible audience, while also reflecting critically on media restrictions and conventions, and attempting to realize alternative uses of these means of communication. Evaluating the current means of communication in the 1970s, Forest explains:

The so-called means of communication for the masses that characterize our time are not in reality actual tools for communication because their use only follows a one-dimensional model. Their generalization leads to passivity and participates in the leveling of knowledge. This generalization also contributes to maintaining outdated ideologies with which the new generations have more and more difficulty identifying.<sup>50</sup>

In many respects, this quote evokes ideas formulated by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, first published in France in 1967. Debord warns of the ideological manipulation occurring in late consumer societies, resulting in a degradation of knowledge and critical thinking. He also argues that the social bond has been fragmented because experience is mediated through images, giving rise to a passive acceptance of and identification with spectacle as a regime, in which ultimately the image becomes capital. In a rare direct attack on the role of the mass media, Debord asserts:

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<sup>50</sup> Fred Forest, "Réflexions sur l'Art sociologique (1977)," in Forest, *Art sociologique. Vidéo*, 44. My translation.

If the spectacle, taken in the limited sense of “mass media” which is its most glaring superficial manifestation, seems to invade society as mere equipment, this equipment is in no way neutral but is the very means suited to its total self-movement. If the social needs of the epoch in which such techniques are developed can only be satisfied through their mediations, if the administration of this society and all contact among men can no longer take place except through the intermediary of this power of instantaneous communication, it is because this “communication” is essentially *unilateral*. The concentration of “communication” is thus an accumulation, in the hands of the existing system’s administration, of the means, which allow it to carry on this particular administration.<sup>51</sup>

Surprisingly, in his depiction of the society of the spectacle, Debord rarely directly refer to the mass media, as if he does not want to reduce the ideological operations of capitalism to this, and suggests instead that its noticeable effects can take a diversity of possible forms. Nevertheless, the mass media, in a restricted sense, is constantly suggested in Debord’s criticism, even though he agrees with McLuhan that the media are not the cause of the problem, but just one of its effects. Forest was of course aware of Debord’s ideas, which were popular in France in the early 1970s. In his works from this period, the artist clearly attempts to alter the monodirectional character of mass media. After all, Debord’s criticism of the passivity of modern spectatorship resonated with Forest’s mission, throughout the 1970s, to awaken viewers and modify their submissive relation to the media.

### **a. *Space-Media***

Forest created *Space Media*, a series of media actions beginning in 1972, to suggest that other models of interaction between the mass media and their audience are possible. In *Space*

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<sup>51</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Perlman and Supak (1970), section 24.

*Media*, the artist intervenes in various forms of mass media (television, radio, press) by creating blank spaces in the flow of information or creating voids of communication; these empty spaces are offered by the artist for the viewers' own use. Like feminist collectives, Forest sought to create a space for a more independent, democratic and diverse media expression. However, while militant video developed as an alternative practice at the margins of the mainstream, and outside of the artistic and media sphere, Forest insisted on being active and visible within both the art field *and* the mass media, and attempted to bridge the two.

The first version of *Space Media* happened on January 12, 1972, in the French national daily newspaper *Le Monde* (Fig. 31). The project followed three years of negotiations between the artist and the editorial board, which resulted in obtaining free advertising space in the Art section of the newspaper. The extensive length of negotiations necessary to initiate the project with *Le Monde* reveals the unwillingness of the mass media, like other societal structures, to challenge its own operative regime. This tension is present in most of Forest's projects as his work intends to place stress upon these sites of resistance. The empty space represented only a section of the newspaper page, and was left blank by the artist, in sharp contrast with the graphic density of the newspaper, which respected the press's longstanding motto that "space is money". Entitled *150 cm<sup>2</sup> of Newspaper*, Forest's blank space also functioned as a multiple, numbering 435,000 copies according to the newspaper's daily circulation. At the bottom of the blank space a caption provided information and directions to the reader indicating how to use it:

Space-media – this is an experiment, an attempt at communication. The painter Fred Forest offers this white surface to you. [Let's] seize it, with writing or drawing. Express yourself. The entire page of this newspaper will become a work

of art. Yours. If you want, you can frame it. But Fred Forest encourages you to send it back to him... He will use it to conceive a “work of media art” in the framework of an exhibition of painting that will take place soon at the Grand Palais.<sup>52</sup>

The 800 hundred readers who responded may have been motivated to participate in Forest’s projects for the sake of the opportunity to show in an exhibition at the Grand Palais, but the gesture remains primary: to occupy a free space of communication with personal messages, ideas or opinions. Catherine Millet suggests: “When the artist paid [sic] for a large advertising space in a leading newspaper (1972) and then left it blank, while encouraging readers to occupy the space by writing or drawing on it, what was he asking them to do if not to express themselves (or to let off steam) within a space that usually imposes on them the authority of its knowledge?”<sup>53</sup>

According to sociologist Jean Duvignaud, “The people answered because of a *horror vacui*, because our ‘society of the spectacle’ was a civilization of the ‘full,’ the first civilization of the full; and the vacuum was awkward.”<sup>54</sup> Needless to say, the nature of the participants’ responses contrasted widely with the information that usually circulated in the newspaper; however, they were to an extent also diverse and inventive. For instance, personal contributions ranged from “Hello from...”, to collage, to “38 mm of Fred Forest” and to more ideologically charged

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<sup>52</sup> This caption was reproduced in Yann Pavie, “Space-media, Information-Communication de Fred Forest,” *Opus International*, no. 34 (April 1972): 58. My translation. On page 57 of this same issue, the author also reproduced a selection of written and drawn responses that had been received from *Le Monde*’s readers.

<sup>53</sup> Millet, *Contemporary Art in France*, trans. Penwarden (2006), 186. Millet erroneously states that the advertising space was paid, when it was given for free to the artist.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Duvignaud, “Préface: Un pirate,” in Forest, *Art sociologique. Vidéo*, 16. My translation.

messages: “To communicate = to multiply = to divide” (Fig. 32). Many also understood the artist’s offer as a provocation and presented insults and attacks on Forest’s credibility and integrity as an artist. One of the participants who revealed his identity was the Lettrist Maurice Lemaître, who used his contribution to *Space Media* to accuse Forest of plagiarism. What meaning do these responses have for the artist, and what value do they have as material to be exhibited in a museum? Whatever form they took, Forest understood these expressions to reflect on the state of mind of a population, and as such were relevant in and of themselves, as documents of a given time. These contributions were then collected and presented in museums, in the venues to which Forest had been invited, where they were displayed according to the chronological order in which the artist had received them: first at the Grand Palais, during the *Salon Grands et jeunes d’aujourd’hui* (“Today’s Great and Young”) in 1972, and then at several other venues: during the exhibition *Propos sur la Communication* at the Centre Albertus Magnus in Paris (1972), at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts of Lausanne (1972), and during *Expérience ‘Space Media’* at the Institut de l’Environnement in Paris (1974).

Using newspapers as the vehicle for his *Space Media* series immediately gave Forest exposure, and a chance to reach the widest possible audience, in terms of number as well as diversity. As Forest explained:

By transmitting through mass media rather than through art museums, the messages have less specific targets, but the targets the art museum aims at nonetheless are hit through this channel. In any event, this can only widen the circle of potential recipients, reach them from afar. And in this way achieve new

type of relationship with them, encouraged by the originality of the situation thus created.<sup>55</sup>

The use of mass media permitted Forest to go beyond the museum audience and to reach a demographic unaccustomed to museums and contemporary art. As both Debord and de Certeau point out, access to culture too often results from the dynamics of class structure, which divides those who make culture from those who receive and consume it.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in France as well as elsewhere, access to culture was at the center of discussion among artists and intellectuals; initiatives outside of institutions were encouraged by the Situationist International, GRAV, Michel Journiac, Gina Pane, Daniel Buren, Christo and Jeanne Claude, and André Cadere, to mention only a few of the best known. In France, ongoing debates urged the necessity of cultural decentralization, as well as questioning the suitability of the museum to offer a truly democratic access to culture. André Malraux's concept of an "Imaginary Museum" (1949) was influential on these debates; Malraux argues that exposure to the world of reproductions constitutes a "museum without walls", understood as a valuable personal and conceptual cultural space. In the 1980s, Malraux's ideas were seen as anticipating concepts of the virtual or postmodern museum. After *Le musée imaginaire*, Malraux became a central figure of French cultural policy, and eventually became the first Minister of

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<sup>55</sup> Fred Forest, David Sugarman, and Joanna Weston, "Communication, Esthetics, Interactive Participation and Artistic Systems of Communication and Expression," *Design Issues*: 4, nos. 1-2 (1988): 98.

Cultural Affairs (1960-9), when he developed a series of decentralized Maisons de la Culture.<sup>56</sup> Forest's concept *Space Media*, was typical of this climate even if, as a project, it deliberately did not develop entirely outside the institution: it originated in the mass media but ultimately returned to the museum, since the viewers' contributions were later presented in exhibition. Forest's use of mass media was a way to blur social boundaries commonly associated with access to culture, and exemplifies an attempt to bridge the gap between the museum and a larger audience, which was invited to interact more actively than in the traditional museum experience of viewer-as-receiver.

In the following years, Forest started mapping the mass media as a territory and continued applying his "Space Media" system to a diversity of media – the written press, television and radio – of various political persuasions, in France as well as abroad.<sup>57</sup> He sought to avoid a situation in which he reached an audience oriented only towards a certain style of media or a specific political orientation. Forest took advantage of the competition between media

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<sup>56</sup> André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire* (Paris: A. Skira, 1949). On Malraux's connection with postmodernism, see Rosalind Krauss, "Le Musée sans murs du postmodernisme," Special Issue: "L'Œuvre et son accrochage," *Cahiers du Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne* 17-18 (1986): 152-8.

<sup>57</sup> From 1972 to 1974, *Space Media* was show in various media formats. Examples in the French written press include *Le Monde* (center-left), *Télérama* (French cultural magazine owned by *Le Monde*), *Cause commune* (left) and *Ouest-France* (center-right). Internationally, *Space Media* projects took place in Switzerland (*Tribune de Lausanne*), Belgium (*Eksit*), Sweden (*Sydsvenska Dagbladet*), Brazil (*Jornal da Tarde*, *O Estado São Paulo*, *Folha de São Paulo*, *O Globo Rio de Janeiro*, *Folha da Tarde*, *Jornal do Bahia*, *Diario de Parana*, *Zero Hora Allegré* and *Ultima Hora*) and Argentina (*Clarín*). Examples of *Space Media* on radio, in the form of one minute of silence, include Europe no. 1, France-Culture, France-Inter (France), Radio Jovem Pam (Brazil) and Radio Suisse Romande (Switzerland). Television appearances of *Space Media*, as one minute with a blank screen, include Antenne 2 (France), Bandeirantes Canal 13 (Brazil), Z.D.F. (Germany), R.A.I. (Italy) and Radio-Télévision Belge (Belgium).

outlets, and managed to place *Space Media* on national television (on Antenne 2, the second channel of French television), for example, because of its appearance in a national newspaper, and because he let it be known that the competing channel, T.F.1 (the first channel, Télévision Française 1), was also interested in airing it. In early 1972, only two channels were available on French television, T.F.1 and Antenne 2. The third channel F.R.3, conceived as a public network of regional television services, aired for the first time in December 1972. The first *Space Media* action on television took place on January 20, 1972, during Télé-Midi, the news at noon. Entitled *Action: 60 secondes de blanc* (“Action: 60 Seconds of White”), the visual broadcast on French national television was left blank for one minute (Fig. 33). The television screen was totally blank with the exception of two capital letters and a number “TM 72”, in the right bottom corner of the screen, as an improvised logo standing for “Télé-Midi, 1972”. The television producers had refused, despite the insistence of the artist, to withdraw the reference to the television show that hosted the action, and have a totally blank screen. At the same time, viewers could hear Forest’s pre-recorded voice-over explaining, “Be careful! Be careful! Your television receiver is not out of order. You are participating in the live experience of *Space Media*. Let’s bring the world back to its beginning, white to start from zero, to start over, to imagine it as you wish, a free space, an empty space to fill.”<sup>58</sup> Because the televisual form of *Space Media* did not provide the participants with an actual support of communication – unlike the blank piece of paper in the newspapers – but asked them to project it in their minds, the level of responses was far fewer than actions conducted in newspapers. After this action on TF1, nonetheless, Forest collected

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<sup>58</sup> Transcription from the recording of the television show, available in the INA Archives (BNF, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris). My translation.

150 responses from Télé-Midi spectators in the form of drawings, letters, photographs and other means of expression; their sentiments were basically of a similar nature and spirit to those that had been received to his *Space Media* action in the newspaper (Fig. 34). Based on the same principle, Forest also conducted *Space Media* on radio. The first occurrence was on national radio, France Inter, on September 22, 1974, during a weekend radio show *L'Oreille en coin*. Entitled *30 secondes de blanc signé Fred Forest*, it consisted in setting the radio to silent for the given time following a message by Forest announcing that an artistic action was about to take place.

On a number of occasions, Pierre Restany notes that “Forest’s square of paper [in *Space Media*] becomes the empty/full by Yves Klein.”<sup>59</sup> His references is to Klein’s notorious exhibition *Le vide* (“The Void”) at the Iris Clert Gallery in 1958, to which Arman responded with *Le plein* (“The Full”, 1960) filling up the same gallery with garbage during his solo show. For *Le vide* Klein left the gallery totally empty with the exception of the gallery front windows painted with his branded blue (IKB, International Klein Blue) and a curtain at the entrance of the gallery. Using newspapers as medium, Forest’s *Space Media* also evokes Klein’s version of *Journal du Dimanche* of November 27, 1960 in which he showed his mythic *Leap into the Void*, a photomontage on the cover page showing the artist jumping off a wall into a quiet street. But Forest’s project is fundamentally different to Klein’s in its intention to intervene within the sphere of the media and to cultivate a reciprocal relationship with the audience. On other occasions, Restany describes Forest’s project *Space Media* as remedy to the simulacra, in

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<sup>59</sup> Pierre Restany, “La sociologie généralisée,” *Domus*, no. 592, March 1979: 54. My translation.

reference to Baudrillard's theory, popular in France throughout the 1980s: "Forest's game [*Media Space*] is a perfect structural simulation of our world, of our mass media world [...]. Through his simulacra of the mass media, the artist proves the immanence of the real."<sup>60</sup>

According to Baudrillard, reality in late capitalist society has been replaced by simulacra (a copy without an original), a fictional version of itself, a hyperreality propagated above all by the mass media and made of self-referential signs of its own existence.<sup>61</sup> Misreading Baudrillard's argument that there is no more reality outside its reproduction, Restany suggests that Forest is able to sustain a critical distance towards the mass media, which allows him to reverse the simulacra back to reality. Vilém Flusser offered a more skeptical evaluation of *Space Media*: "From the viewpoint of an exterior observer, [Forest's method] failed for obvious reasons. The mass media that Forest hoped to reify through its appropriation as a material has eventually absorbed Forest's intervention and, in turn, transformed the artist into a tool for the same mass media."<sup>62</sup> While both Restany and Flusser overstate their points, it is nevertheless fair to say that Forest's *Space Media* managed to divert the mass media away from their usual modes of information transmission, even while it was also substantially dependent on them, in the manner of most Institutional Critique.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibidem. My translation.

<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Foss, Patton, and Beitchman (1983).

<sup>62</sup> Vilém Flusser, "Fred Forest ou la destruction des points de vue établis (1975)." This text is accessible on the Web Net Museum, [http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/textes\\_critiques/auteurs/flusser\\_fr.htm#text](http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/textes_critiques/auteurs/flusser_fr.htm#text) (accessed September 11, 2010). My translation.

With *Space Media*, Forest convincingly invalidates the mass media as means of communication by momentarily breaking or suspending its flow of information. Forest has been outspoken about the excessive transmission of information and of visual data: “The over proliferation of visual media and the exponential growth in the number of images produced paradoxically contribute, if not to the disappearance of the image and its aesthetics, then at least to its devaluation.”<sup>63</sup> These ideas are drawn from Information theory – the discipline that quantifies and evaluates models of communication – and resonates with those of one of its pioneers, Abraham Moles, also one of Forest’s collaborators.<sup>64</sup> “Redundancy reduces information”, wrote Moles, “One of the fundamental characteristics of the human receptor is the existence of a maximum *limit* to the flow of perceptible information.”<sup>65</sup> In keeping with this analysis, rather than delivering more information, Forest’s *Space Media* reduced the amount of communication in circulation. In addition, *Space Media* delegated the formulation of its content to the audience, incorporating the possibility of feedback.

These tactics aimed to disturb the unidirectional model of communication traditionally used by the media. But beyond feedback itself, what was essential in the formulation of *Space*

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<sup>63</sup> Forest, Sugarman, and Weston, “Communication, Esthetics, Interactive Participation” (1988), 105.

<sup>64</sup> Information theory was founded in 1948 and popularized throughout the 1950s and 60s. Feedback is a central notion in Cybernetics, an interdisciplinary field of study, related to Information theory, but more interested in understanding structures and regulatory systems; it refers to operative systems that suggests a response to a signal.

<sup>65</sup> Abraham Moles, *Théorie de l’information et perception esthétique* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1958), 74 and 124. My translation.

*Media*, as well as in its various stages of development, was Forest's larger conception of reciprocity and participation:

When we face the publication of a white surface at the middle of a newspaper page, "the work of art" is not only the materialization of this space, but also "all" that has preceded its realization, and "all" that will follow in the participation that it requires, the return of the responses, their presentations, their eventual publication, etc. Last but not least, [it is] the multiple inter-human exchanges, the encounters, and the contacts that it has initiated with the dynamic that it carries.<sup>66</sup>

It is in the projects he realized in Brazil, for his participation in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Bienals, that Forest more fully explores those ideas concerning participation, reciprocity and human relationships.

#### **b. 12<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Bienal (1973)**

In 1973, Forest was invited to participate in the 12<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Bienal by Vilém Flusser (then Professor of Communications at the Escola Superior de Cinema in São Paulo), as part of the section "Art and Communication", which grouped a significant number of participatory practices by artists. For the Bienal, Forest created a vast diversity of actions based on his concept *Space Media*. The most visible of these actions was an installation comprising a dozen telephones presented on pedestals and aligned in a row, found on the second floor of Niemeyer's building where the Bienal took place (Fig. 35). The telephones were connected and spectators were able

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<sup>66</sup> Fred Forest, "Space-Media," in *XII Bienal de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1973), 215. My translation.

to place calls in order to leave short personal messages that were recorded on answering machines, amplified through speakers and transmitted through the exhibition. The messages could be kept anonymous, but were limited to two minutes in length. Messages could be placed not only from the phones available in the Bienal, but from the entire country, since invitations to dial a given phone number were issued daily on Brazilian radio and in newspapers (*Jornal do Brasil, Jornal da Tarde o Estado, Diario de São Paulo, Folha de São Paulo, O Globo, Folha da Tarde, Jornal do Bahia, Diario de Parana, Zera Hora Porto Alegre, and Ultima Hora São Paulo*). This was not all, Forest developed further actions in the form of invitations circulating in the printed press, offering readers the opportunity to compose messages in spaces left blank in newspapers, not unlike the *Le Monde* project described above. Returned messages were hung on the walls of the exhibition space in the order in which they were received. There were also occurrences of “one minute of white” scheduled on the Brazilian television network (Canal 13 Bandeirantes and Television Cultura), and the collected material from these were also hung in the Bienal (Fig. 36). In order to expand the level of participation even further, Forest improvised several street actions, conceived as public animations, in public squares, supermarkets, stadiums and samba schools. One of these actions involved Forest handing out pens and paper with the official Bienal letterhead, inviting groups and individual bystanders to contribute to the Bienal by using them in some way (Fig. 37).<sup>67</sup> As these recordings – the only document of these actions – attest, the reactions to the invitation were extremely positive and the audience participated willingly.

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<sup>67</sup> A copy of this documentation from 17 October 1973 is available at the INA Archives, under the title *Action de Rues* (“Streets Action”), 1973.

Forest's use of video documentation in relation to his street actions invites a comparison to performance, since both use it to record live public events. However, Forest is an "animator" rather than a performance artist. He does not perform in front of an audience, but is always slightly on the side, acting as a coordinator, encouraging the viewer to participate. Catherine Millet also addresses the relationship between Art sociologique, performance and conceptual art, when she writes about contemporary practices in the 1970s that go beyond painting:

By definition, the destabilizing actions of Art sociologique were aimed at social structures and primarily, of course, cultural structures. Conceptual and Body Art, too, sometimes had a critical, sociological dimension, for example Buren and Cadere exposing the contradictions of the museum; or the *Stand Journiac* at the Salon de Mai in 1969, parodying the way artists sometimes sell themselves at this kind of event. But the defining characteristic of Art sociologique was the way it perpetuated the positivist values it had inherited from the avant-gardes, values that had in fact begun to crumble.<sup>68</sup>

Disregarding the participatory aspect of Art sociologique, Millet's appreciation perpetuated the confusion that too often resulted in an assimilation of Art sociologique to conceptual or performance art.

Forest's compulsive collection of viewer contributions sometimes led to criticism of his work, centered primarily on a misunderstanding of the artist's position regarding authorship, as well as of the concept of audience participation. Liliane Touraine's *Art Press* review of Forest's book *Art sociologique* is an example of such criticism that called into question the artist's ethics:

Unlike other communitarian video experiences, it must be noted that participants' interventions in Forest's actions are ultimately erased and replaced by a report – similar

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<sup>68</sup> Millet, *Contemporary Art in France*, trans. Penwarden (2006), 186.

to a police report – that becomes the work of Fred Forest. What remains in the memory, as on the cover of his book, is the image of Fred Forest, an image that pretends to bring Truth and Morality, not only to the micro artistic field but also to the good people in the form of education... Fred Forest's attitude to his work often reminded me of an entomologist who collects mosquitoes, puts them in a jar, and commences to shake the jar, to urge on them, just to observe their reactions and their behaviors.<sup>69</sup>

At that time, Forest was defending a sociological approach to art and, just couple of years later, actually promoted a methodology akin to the social sciences, but an analysis of the data collected during his actions has never been part of the artist's project. A social sciences methodology was developed by Forest, along with Hervé Fischer and Jean-Paul Thenot, in the framework of the Collectif d'art sociologique (1974-81). In their collaborative projects, the artists frequently used questionnaires to survey the audience's views on art and socio-political matters. In their first "Manifeste d'Art sociologique" published in 1974, they explained: "(Art sociologique) fundamentally makes use of the theories and methodologies of the social sciences. In practice, it also wants to create a field of investigation and experimentation for the theory of sociology. The Collectif d'art sociologique... uses the methods of animation, survey, and pedagogy".<sup>70</sup> GRAV also handed out survey in the streets, in the mid-1960s, to obtain the opinions of viewers on their appreciation and relationship with modern art. In fact, Forest collects and quantifies the material sent in by participants but does not evaluate it qualitatively, nor passes judgment on it. This is not to say that Forest disregards this material as unworthy of study. On the contrary, he insists that it should be studied and is available to those who would like to analyze it, but the

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<sup>69</sup> Liliane Touraine, "Fred Forest, Art sociologique," *Art Press International*, no. 18 (May 1978): 37. My translation.

<sup>70</sup> Fred Forest, Hervé Fischer, and Jean-Paul Thenot, "Manifeste 1 de l'Art sociologique," *Le Monde* (October 10, 1974). My translation.

assessment of the participant responses is simply not part of the artist's contribution, nor is it the intended outcome of the work.

While further analysis of the results is needed, a brief comparison of the differences in audience response to Forest's projects in France and in Brazil in the early 1970s is nevertheless worth undertaking. In Brazil, for example, the level of participation was much higher and the responses generally more enthusiastic than those received in France, which were often aggressive and suspicious of the artist's motivations. Audience participation in the context of Brazilian visual arts inevitably brings to mind the legacy of Hélio Oiticica, who was associated with Neo-Concretism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Oiticica's *Parangolés*, capes made of poor fabrics, were worn and performed by Mangueira samba dancers. Forest's actions in samba schools derived from a different understanding of the social potential of dance, it was as a strategic choice for approaching the local community, rather than deriving from an intrinsic interest in dance (as was the case with Oiticica). Forest claims that he had no knowledge of Neo-Concretism when he participated in the São Paulo Bienal in 1973.

In Brazil, Forest's actions were unproblematically understood as gestures of generosity towards the audience. There, participants' responses were also noticeably more politically charged than those of the French audience. According to the artist, one third of the audience's contributions collected in Brazil had a political character. The viewer's responses in France were proportionally far less politically motivated.<sup>71</sup> France in the early 1970s was marked by a climate

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<sup>71</sup> Fred Forest, interview with the author, Paris, January 15, 2011.

of political disillusionment and economic struggle due to the instability on the US and European stock markets, the political tension that resulted from this, exacerbated in 1973 by the oil crisis. Brazil, on the other hand, was enduring a military dictatorship in which free speech was severely constrained. Brazil was under the control of successive military dictatorships between 1964 and 1985. During this period opponents to the regime were deported, imprisoned, tortured or murdered. As discussed in Chapter One, women's collectives addressed the military dictatorship in Brazil; the video *Inès*, produced by Delphine Seyrig with Les Insoumuses, in 1975, reconstructed the rapes and tortures endured by Ines Etienne Romeu during her imprisonment in Brazil.

The political dimension of Forest's project in Brazil was undeniably driven by the political situation at the time. This can be better evaluated by looking at the most memorable and representative of the street actions that Forest organized during the Bienal. *Le blanc envahit la ville* ("White Invades the City") was a one-off event on November 7, 1973; the artist was not the main performer but hired a group of ten people who simply circulated the city center of São Paulo in silence, holding signs above their heads (then a common advertising practice in the city) (Fig. 38). The group was paid for two hours at their usual rate to hold blank white signs, and was instructed to walk together, grouped around Forest. This set-up by Forest is often compared to Daniel Buren's *Hommes-Sandwiches*, which were used for the first time in April-May 1968, in tandem with the presentation of his work at the 24<sup>th</sup> *Salon de Mai* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Buren hired two sandwich board men to circulate in the streets of Paris, carrying signs bearing the artist's signature alternating green and white vertical stripes.

Nonetheless, Forest's street action is more closely related to pioneer of Postmodern dance Anna Halprin's street choreography *Blank Placard Dance*, 1967, where participants in the San Francisco Dance's workshop carried as a mean of protest in the street similar blank signs. Forest's street action was documented in photography and video, capturing both the action itself and the reactions of bystanders.<sup>72</sup> The action quickly attracted hundreds of casual observers – more than two thousand, according to Catherine Millet – that at some point blocked traffic, and eventually resulted in Forest's arrest by military police and a ten-hour interrogation at the Brazilian Department of Political and Social Order.<sup>73</sup> Like *Space Media*, the blank signs used during this action were invitations for the viewer to formulate his or her own message. It goes without saying that Forest's intention to offer a space for free expression was in direct confrontation with the military regime. Forest's action *Le blanc envahit la ville* gave the impression of a political demonstration, not least because the artist devised its itinerary according to the locations of recent revolutionary events. The actions created during the Bienal of 1973 were not the only attacks by Forest against Brazilian military dictatorship. Invited to the following edition of the Bienal in 1975, Forest conceived *Biennale de l'an 2000* ("The Year 2000 Bienal"), a parody of the XIII São Paulo's Bienal that criticized the repressive regime and its attempt to exercise political control over the Bienal of contemporary art.

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<sup>72</sup> Recordings from *White Invades the City* were presented by Vilém Flusser and Jorge Glusberg during *Open-Circuits, An International Conference on the Future of Television* that took place in January 1974 at the Museum of Modern Art of New York. The presentations were turned into a book that does not mention Forest's project: Douglas Davis, Allison Simmons and Barbara London, *The New Television: A Private/Public Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977).

<sup>73</sup> Millet, *Contemporary Art in France*, trans. Penwarden (2006), 186.

In 1973, Forest won *Prêmio de comunicação* (“Communication Prize”) at the São Paulo Bienal, in recognition of his action described above, as well as for the entire series of projects conceived for the exhibition – even if, paradoxically, given his use of exclusively “white spaces” and blank screens, Forest did not actually communicate anything. This position ultimately differentiates Forest from women’s video collectives, for whom a clear socio-political message in the production, often hand written within the video or enounced with voice-over, was the essential and motivating factor for the entire project. However, this should not be seen as a lack of political commitment on Forest’s part. Instead we should remind ourselves of the position defended by Forest, in the vein of Marshall McLuhan’s famous sound bite “The medium is the message”, in which a focus is placed on process rather than outcome. In this perspective, Forest’s politics lie in the way his work is conceived and developed, for example in its structure, organization and collaborative effort, and in his desire to expose others’ opinions, rather than by way of an explicit message to be received by the viewer.<sup>74</sup>

These concepts were present in a subsequent project that Forest realized in Brazil. *Promenade sociologique à Brooklyn* (“Sociological Stroll in Brooklyn”) was a collective investigation of a local urban district (the popular neighborhood of Brooklyn in the suburbs of São Paulo), which took place in November 1973 (Fig. 39). Invitations circulating in the daily press brought 30 participants to the Museum of Contemporary Art of São Paulo, where they picked up stools (numbered from one to thirty) and then departed by bus from the museum to

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<sup>74</sup> For further reflections on the theoretical underpinning of these politics see Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer (1934),” *New Left Review* 62, no. 1 (July-August, 1970).

Brooklyn. The artist scheduled different stops: at a hairdresser, a gas station, a record store, a butcher, a church and an art gallery. The aim was for participants to engage in discussion and exchange with the people in the various locations visited (as well as with one another), and eventually connect or reconnect socially from this experience and beyond. This action was recorded on video. This action was recently re-enacted under similar conditions in Brooklyn, New York, in September 2011 (curated by Ruth Erickson). To an extent, Forest's *promenades* recalls the Situationist "dérive" or drifting, but Forest's "promenade" is a group practice and cannot be experienced individually. A further difference is that in a *promenade*, it is Forest who set the itinerary ahead of time, while the itinerary of a *dérive* is determined as it takes place. Forest's work could also be compared to that of artists who have emerged since the 1990s. Forest's understanding of verbal exchange as artistic gesture prefigures several works described by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*. For years, Forest has looked for an opportunity to confront Bourriaud on the precedence of Art sociologique in the 1970s for Relational Aesthetics. In addition, Forest's recurrent valorization of precedence shows also when he argues that his work anticipates practices from the 2000s, such as Tino Segahl's performances that develop in the form of a structured conversation with the public.

Other projects by Forest in the 1970s were organized around the significance of human relationships and also anticipate more recent art. *Télé-choc télé-change*, for example, took place on the French national television channel Antenne 2, between March 22 and April 19, 1975, during the show *Un jour futur*, hosted by Michel Lancelot (Fig. 40). During the television show, Forest asked for the viewers' submissions and invited them to exchange objects with which they

had some emotional connection. The sequencing of the project was as follows: on March 22, 1975, Forest appeared on the television show *Un jour futur* and requested viewers to send to him an object accompanied by a short note that explained their relationship (real or imaginary) with this artefact. Three hundred objects were received. On April 12, some of the participants in the project were invited on the stage of *Un jour futur* to speak about the object they had sent. On April 18, all the participants in the project were invited to meet under the Eiffel Tower, where they were able to regain possession of their personal object or had the opportunity to exchange it with other participants. The meeting at the Eiffel Tower was recorded by the camera crew of *Un jour futur* and broadcast on the television show on April 19. This work recalls Matthieu Laurette's *El Gran Trueque* ("The Great Exchange", 2000) a television game copyrighted by the artist and broadcasted in Bilbao (Fig. 41), which involved audience participation and the exchange of objects on television (discussed in further detail in Chapter Four). Forest's goal with *Télé-choc télé-change* was to "create 'another' television, different from its usual function in regards to information, spectacle and fiction. Could television become a social link and a stimulation for the imaginary?"<sup>75</sup> Forest's question expresses criticism towards mass media, without denying their potential for more creative human relationships that depart from their usual limited and unidirectional modes.

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<sup>75</sup> See the project description for "*Télé-choc télé-change*", [http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/14\\_fr.htm#text](http://www.webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/expo-retr-fredforest/actions/14_fr.htm#text) (accessed September 26, 2010). My translation.

### c. Sociological Video Installations

Throughout the 1970s, Forest conceived various video installations, where technology was used as a tool for sociological experimentation and investigation, which allowed him to reflect on the effects of the media, and their ability to modify human perception. These notions were studied in a series of closed-circuit video installations he created for galleries. Key examples of this body of work are *Archéologie du présent: Autopsie de la rue Guénegaud* (“Archeology of the present: Autopsy of Guénegaud Street”), held at Germain Gallery, Paris, in May 1973, and *Autopsie et analyse électro-sociologique de la rue Augusta: Petit musée de la consommation* (“Autopsy and Electro-Sociologic Analysis of Augusta Street: Small Museum of Consumption”) at Portal Gallery, São Paulo, in December 1973. These projects also addressed the problematic relationship between the viewer and the screen, since they focus on the way that the latter affects the viewer’s perception.

*Autopsie de la rue Guénegaud* was an investigation into a street in the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris, where the gallery was also located (Fig. 42). For this project, the entire length of the street was placed under video-surveillance with three closed-circuit cameras broadcasting, in the gallery and in real-time, all the activity on the street. The street was shown in the exhibition as a life-size video projection on one of the gallery walls; broadcasts were also repeated on ten television monitors arranged in installations inside the gallery.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, more cameras

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<sup>76</sup> Korean-American Nan June Paik was a pioneer in the field of video installation. In 1966, he started stacking TV monitors in installations, then he went on composing video wall; when screens are arranged and juxtaposed in ways to a cover section or an entire wall.

recorded the interior of the gallery, whose images were projected through the gallery front window to the viewers on the street. In the gallery, in addition to the live broadcast of the street view, a number of elements and objects were on display, including an inscription on the wall reading “A cette époque à Paris” (“At this time in Paris”) and a series of objects found in trash bins in the street. A further element of the show was a time clock on which visitors to the exhibit were encouraged to punch their invitation card and record the exact day and time when they became aware of Guénegaud Street. The invitation card also function as a multiple edition. Forest already used this idea with his series *Media Space*, when the blank space in the newspaper page was conceived as an edition, whose number of copies depended on the newspaper’s usual print run. Flusser and Restany were invited to participate in the project as archaeologists of the present, and provided sound recordings of their observations about the street.

For the second video installation, seven months later in São Paulo, Forest conceives a very similar situation with video surveillance. For *Autopsie de la rue Augusta*, he installed a camera to record images of this commercial street, which were then projected on a video wall of 40 television monitors in the exhibition space (Fig. 43). Once again, a time clock and punch cards were used, and the invitation card, inspired by the one in Paris, was translated into Portuguese. The exhibition included seven vitrines in which Forest placed everyday merchandise from the neighborhood’s stores, such as can food, eggs, socks, etc.; these were labeled with basic descriptions of the objects and explanations of their function, as if their knowledge had been lost. Both exhibitions were based on an anthropological investigation of a given socio-geographic situation; they also invited the viewers to become participant-observers of everyday life. Perhaps

more importantly, by juxtaposing the physical reality of the street with its electronic representation through a screen, the exhibitions suggested that an electronic representation of their own environment might affect viewers' habitual perception of their time and space. In the mid-1960s, McLuhan had already pointed out that in the electronic age, time and space collide in human perception.<sup>77</sup> In both investigations of the streets, for example, the viewers were already unwittingly present in the gallery space even before they physically entered it. By titling the works an "archaeology" or "autopsy", Forest suggests that images mediated on screen could result in a perception of the present as something experienced in the past.

Continuing his research into the effects of the screen on human perception, Forest developed several projects that focused on the presence/absence of human representation on screen by taking up the theme of electronic media's ubiquity. The result was an artificial image that anticipates, in many respects, notions of simulacra and hyperreality as defined by Baudrillard.<sup>78</sup> This image eventually becomes, for Forest's viewers, a substitution for their own bodily presence and for human interaction. The most explicit example of this is arguably *La famille vidéo* ("The Video Family", 1976), a video action organized by Forest in a private apartment for rent in Cologne (Fig. 44). In this project, a television monitor is placed in the middle of the floor of each room of an empty apartment; the screens do not show an image but broadcast sound recordings of conversation using male, female and children's voices. Along with nametags added to the monitors, this suggests the presence of a family in the apartment, the

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<sup>77</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Foss, Patton, and Beitchman (1983).

“Video Family”, comprising parents, two children and a baby; each TV monitor symbolically represents one member of the family. The opening of the work furthered Forest’s desire to expand and mix his audiences: the viewers were a combination of guests invited to an opening, via a traditional invitation card, and actual apartment hunters who had read a newspaper advertisement presenting this apartment for rent.

In different ways, the project plays with the borderline of what is real and what is not, as does *Restany dîne à La Coupole* (“Restany Eats at La Coupole”), a simultaneous action and video installation by Forest, involving the art critic Pierre Restany. It took place at the famous Montmartre restaurant La Coupole on October 22, 1974 (Fig. 45). The installation comprised a television monitor, showing a video recording of Restany having dinner. The monitor was on a table in the restaurant’s dining room, its screen facing a plate. The project is complicated by the actual presence of Restany in the restaurant, dressed identically to the figure on the monitor, eating his dinner at another table. The work insists on the ambiguous status of video representation in relation to the bodily presence, the totality of which produces a site between presence and absence. Furthermore, Restany adds a personal dimension to the piece when he describes it as an objectified and sociological reflection on himself as an art critic:

[This] video is the portrait of an art critic, Restany, having lunch at Forest’s apartment and then dinning at La Coupole. This is the same nutritional action in two different contexts. In the Montparnasse restaurant, the biological activity becomes a social ritual. The video stills fix the functional image of the critic. Does the critic exist outside of his ‘function’? It is a frightening question for someone like me who has forever identified his professional activity and his way

of living [...]. The sociological eye of Forest records the presence of my absence.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, Restany insists on reading the piece in the framework of Art sociologique, meaning that he sees himself impersonating the character and/or the social function of an “art critic” in this video. *Vidéo-portrait d'un collectionneur* (“Video-Portrait of a Collector”) brings about a similar doubling of an actual and represented character. This video action takes place during the sale of one of Forest’s works by the well-known auctioneer Jean-Claude Binoche at the Espace Pierre Cardin, in Paris (Fig. 46). Forest’s video is both created and sold during the auction, as art critic Sylvie Dupuis explains: “In June of 1974, an art auction catalogue published by auctioneer Binoche advertised a piece entitled the *Portrait of a Collector*. The description stated that Fred Forest would record the video tape (that would be for sale) during the sale itself, and that the video would end with a portrait of the actual buyer during several meals.”<sup>80</sup> The piece is self-generated by its own process, and was ultimately bought by Rodolphe Stadler, a collector best known as the owner of the Stadler Gallery, Paris, where Carole Roussopoulos recorded performances by body artists Journiac and Pane. However, as Forest’s project description promises, the work became a video portrait of Stadler; it starts with the bidders during the auction, and ends with recordings of Stadler seating alone at his dining table, in the intimacy of his apartment. Juxtaposing public and private representations of the sitter, Forest

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<sup>79</sup> Pierre Restany, “La présence de l’absence. Paris, décembre 1975”, [http://webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/reflexion/pierre-restany/06\\_presencedelabsence.htm#text](http://webnetmuseum.org/html/fr/reflexion/pierre-restany/06_presencedelabsence.htm#text) (accessed January 12, 2012). My translation.

<sup>80</sup> Sylvie Dupuis, “Forest. La mémoire en miroir,” *Art Press*, no. 54 (December 1981): 22-3. My translation.

seeks to create a more accurate portrait of a collector, which juxtaposes aspects of his socio-professional activity as a collector with the reality of what comes across as a fairly banal and lonely personal life. These works effectively demystify what might generally be thought to be an exciting life of an affluent art collector and art critic.

By 1975, and in opposition to previous projects that sought to create a sociological video or portraits of art professionals, Forest decided to exhibit a media celebrity at his one-man show at the Musée Galliera, Paris. Madame Soleil was already almost exclusively known through her electronic image and media appearances; for *J'expose Madame Soleil en chair et en os* ("I exhibit Madame Soleil in Flesh and Bone"), Forest arranged for this famous astrologer, who had a large following in the French media, to appear live in the gallery (Fig. 47). Throughout the 1970s and up to the early 1990s, Madame Soleil was well known for her daily astrological predictions on national radio, and her regular appearances on television talk shows. For the duration of the exhibition, Madame Soleil agreed to be present on a pedestal, above the audience, while offering free astrological forecasts to the public on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, between 3 and 4 PM. Video documentation of the exhibition shows an excited crowd, gathered around Mme Soleil and taking advantage of this rare opportunity to interact with her in person. Mme Soleil's media image usually rendered her both accessible and inaccessible to a viewer watching a screen; Forest, by contrast, removed the screen and brought Madame Soleil back to "flesh and bone" in front of an audience.

While previous projects by Forest were engaged in a more blatant fascination with the interactive and communicational potential of technology, in these later examples the artist is

eventually more critical of it, or at least exposes some of its ability to mislead. He addresses its ability to modify the viewer's perception of time and space, and to disturb his/her ability to differentiate reality and fiction. However, Forest never intrinsically criticizes the media and new technologies but rather points out their limitations and the risks they present in contemporary society. More generally, Forest proposes a more creative, democratic and interactive use of technology and the mass media that conflicts with their unidirectional operative modes in the 1970s. This allowed him to develop a model of spectatorship that favors collective experiences and human exchange, which began to offer a greater agency to viewers interacting with the screen.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INSTITUTIONALIZING VIDEO AND SCREEN-BASED ART

(1974-85)

In the previous chapters I have argued that video emerged in France at the end of the 1960s, when portable cameras became available. It developed on two fronts: on the one hand, a militant production by women's collectives, which delivered a polemical and politicized message to its viewers; on the other hand, a sociological approach to video, characterized by an engagement with participatory and interactive spectatorship, best exemplified by the early works of Fred Forest and the formation of the Collectif d'art sociologique. The 1970s were marked by post-68 rebelliousness and a suspicion of institutions; both militant video and Art sociologique developed in this context, fostering anti-institutionalism and spreading counter-informational content. However, both practices – most likely as a consequence of their critical attitude – have barely been discussed and have almost no presence in the history of video. What, then, was the fate of these practices in the late 1970s and 1980s, when video finally became widespread medium for the visual arts, exhibited and collected by French museums and institutions? This question will be answered in the conclusion; in the meantime, this chapter will argue that a consensual definition of Video Art was formulated during this process of institutionalization, and that this definition continues to underpin contemporary histories of video in France and beyond.

## 1. Exhibiting Video and Screen-Based Art

This chapter focuses on the period between 1974, when video made its first appearance in institutional context, to the mid-1980s when video was recognized as a medium and promoted by French museums and institutions. Video first appeared in the Paris Biennial in 1975, while the first video festivals began in 1982 and promptly spread to various other cities in France; both were to a certain extent influential in determining subsequent institutional acquisitions. The most important French institution for the history of video is without question the Centre Pompidou, whose Département Nouveaux Médias started acquiring video art in the late 1970s, and which continues to be in charge of the video collection for the entire Musée National d'Art Moderne. The institutionalization of video in the 1980s was furthered by institutional support in the form of commissions and grants to artists using video, which promoted the development of screen-based practices in France. Although Video Art was initially videotape based, it expanded over the decade to include video sculptures, video installations and large-scale projections. These artistic experiments were underpinned by a different approach to spectatorship that did not rely on forms of socio-political engagement and instead favored physical, perceptual and immersive experiences, which contrasted with the spectatorial models outlined in the previous chapters. Because of the acute difference between video works of the 1980s and those socially and politically engaged works of the 1970s, the latter were omitted from the emergent literature on French Video Art and its history. This literature tended to focus on the *content* of video works and overlooked the previous decade's experimental approach to production and dissemination: the socio-political commitments of these videos became an excuse for not considering them as works of art.

**a. *Art/Vidéo Confrontation 74* (1974)**

In France, the first exhibition of video in an institutional context took place at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris during November and December 1974. *Art/Vidéo Confrontation 74* was organized by ARC 2 and CNAAV (Centre National d'Animation Audio-Visuelle) in the framework of the Festival d'Automne, and was curated by its respective directors, Suzanne Pagé and Michel Fansten (Fig. 48). ARC (Animation, Recherche, Confrontation) was founded in 1967 by Pierre Gaudibert as the contemporary section of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. At the time of the exhibition, the CNAAV was affiliated with the French Ministry of Culture; it was created to support independent video creation in France, without calling into question the public monopoly of ORTF (Office for Radio and French Television), which was affiliated with the Ministry of Information. ORTF had total control over the access to the public network of diffusion and allowed only TV professionals to broadcast their production. By contrast, CNAAV was inspired by organizations from Québec developed to promote non-professional video production: it hosted local television projects (in Grenoble, Flaine, and new cities of the Parisian suburbs), audio-visual workshops in schools, cultural centers, immigrants' associations and in psychiatric hospitals.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Fansten, e-mail correspondence with the author, November 25, 2011.

The archives of the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation 74* are held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. A brochure accompanied the exhibition comprised a paper binder holding unpaginated leaflets with texts about the exhibited works (Dominique Belloir, Dany Bloch, Don Foresta, and Yann Pavie, *Art/Vidéo Confrontation 74*, Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1974).

Dany Bloch and Don Foresta were also associated with the exhibition's organization, and both became important figures for the history of Video Art in France; Bloch in particular helped to formulate a definition of Video Art through publications and exhibition projects developed in the 1980s. In 1974, Bloch assisted Suzanne Pagé on the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, was in charge of press for ARC, and wrote a section of the catalogue "La vidéo et les artistes".<sup>2</sup> Foresta, by contrast, was director of the American Cultural Center in Paris (then known as the American Center), a position that he occupied from 1971 to 1976, and saw a commitment to video as part of his diplomatic mission to encourage Franco-American relationships; he pioneered the curating of video art in France. At that time he had already established long-lasting friendships with Nam June Paik, as well as other forerunners of video art, such as Steina and Woody Vasulka.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1971 he had started presenting their videos at the American Center, along with those of Frank Gillette, Bill Viola and Gary Hill, and these presentations were the first opportunity for French audiences to see US video. There is no known catalogue detailing the content of these video screenings, since the archives of the American Cultural Center are currently lost, despite Don Foresta's ongoing attempt to locate them. Thus, what is known today of these early video events is amassed from recollections of the artists, visitors, and director of the American Cultural Center at the time.<sup>4</sup> Ramon Tio Bellido recalls

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<sup>2</sup> Dany Bloch, "La vidéo et les artistes," *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> The Vasulkas founded The Kitchen, in New York, in 1971, which became an eminent location for the history of video. It was at The Kitchen in the early 1970s that many French videographers, then active with a militant production, attended workshops and gained their training with video.

<sup>4</sup> Don Foresta, interview with the author, Paris, January 13, 2011.

that these video presentations used a modest television monitor coupled with a television furniture facing 20 or 30 chairs.<sup>5</sup> According to Foresta, these video cycles at the American Cultural Center were attended by a mix crowd French and American visitors, which included a significant number of French contemporary artists – for whom it was also often the first exposure to video as a medium for the visual arts. For example French artists Robert Cahen, Orlan, and Paul-Armand Gette, were known to have attended these events, and then went on to use video in their artistic work. In the 1980s, Foresta also curated or co-organized a significant number of video exhibitions in France and in the US, most of them including French artists.<sup>6</sup>

Foresta's involvement in the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* allowed the list of participants to be expanded to include a number of American artists, most of whom had previously worked with Foresta at the American Center. The list of major American artists participating in the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation 74* included: Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Linda Benglis, Peter Campus, John Chamberlain, Douglas Davis, Frank Gillette, Dan Graham, Nancy Holt, Allan Kaprow, Paul Kos, Les Levine, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Denis Oppenheim, Nam June Paik, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, Bill Viola, Steina and Woody Vasulka, and William Wegman. *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* was the first exhibition of this scale

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<sup>5</sup> Tio Bellido, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 27, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Some of these exhibitions produced a catalogue: *Art vidéo/Video Art* (Villeurbanne: Le Nouveau Musée, 1980). *French Video – Art vidéo français* (Paris: American Center, 1981). *Film, Video, TV, and Telecommunications 1968-1981* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1981). The most representative artists participating in these exhibitions were: Roland Baladi, Dominique Belloir, Robert Cahen, Catherine Ikam, Thierry Kuntzel, Chris Marker, François Pain, Patrick Prado, Nil Yalter, and Nicole Croiset. They are representative of the first generation of identified visual artists who used video in the framework of the institutionalization of video.

dedicated to video to take place in a French institution, as Fargier recalls: “It was in 1974 at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris that the museum enthroned video as an art form.”<sup>7</sup> This was a respectable date for showing video art in a museum setting; although earlier examples of video exhibitions had taken place in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and Canada, these were primarily in commercial galleries.<sup>8</sup>

As the title suggests, the exhibition aimed to produce a confrontation. (“Confrontation” was a popular theme in the French art world in the 1970s, and was part of ARC’s own acronym: Animation, Recherche, Confrontation.) Fansten, co-curator of the exhibition, stated in the catalogue that the exhibition sought to confront independent and creative video practices with the

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<sup>7</sup> Fargier, “Histoire de la vidéo française,” in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, 55. My translation.

<sup>8</sup> The earliest exhibition history of video art was in commercial galleries: *Electronic Music Television* at Parnass Gallery in Wuppertal, with Wolf Vostell and Nam June Paik (1963). In New York, Bonino Gallery organized Paik’s first solo show in 1966. Castelli and Sonnabend Galleries were also active with video in the late 1960s; together they formed the *Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Film*, a collection of early video from the 1960s and 1970s, today reconstituted at the Whitney Museum as a special collection within the permanent collections. The Howard Wise gallery was also committed to video, and organized the celebrated exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium* in 1969. That same year, Gerry Schum opened the first video gallery in Düsseldorf. Video exhibitions in museums were an exception: the Everson Museum in Syracuse showed video as early as 1967. The Vasulkas started promoting and presenting video at the Whitney Museum in 1971. Fargier, “Histoire de la vidéo française,” in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, 55. My translation. For information on video exhibition history including French productions, see Duguet, “Art vidéo,” *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 177-8. Another important source for the international history of video art is the chronology by the New Media Encyclopedia, <http://www.newmedia-art.org/> (accessed, August 8, 2010). Organized by country, it makes possible a comparative analysis of video production and exhibition making.

development of television and its propagation of limited content.<sup>9</sup> However, this direction was not prevalent in the nature of the works represented (television as a critical target was pretty much absent from the entire exhibition) nor was it apparent as a curatorial theme. Instead, the show assembled an enormous diversity of video practices by 125 artists representing an incredible diversity of countries and approaches to video including body art, performance, militantism, Art sociologique, formalist and medium-based video practice. The international dimension of *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* was one of the curators' primary goals, formulated at the very early stage of the project. Ultimately, the show attempted to inscribe French production within an international framework. In doing so, the exhibition endeavored to identify a specifically French video production in contrast to the international scene, even though there was twice the number of US artists in the show than French.

Moreover, there were no French artists as committed to video in the early 1970s as the US artists Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Nam June Paik and Bill Viola. The French artists most genuinely interested in video in this exhibition were Roland Baladi, Robert Cahen and Fred Forest; I have argued in Chapter Two that video is just one of many media that Forest used at this time, and the same was true of Baladi, who presented a series of videotapes made with students from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Nancy. Robert Cahen's independent video work developed later in the 1980s and will be discussed at the end of this chapter; he showed a video created at the Service de la Recherche of ORTF and was listed both as part of the group working

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Fansten, *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, n.p. There is no text by the co-curator Suzanne Pagé in the exhibition catalogue.

there and as an individual artist. Other French artists participating in the exhibition used video only very occasionally in their careers, along with other media that they clearly preferred, such as photography, installation, performance, film, and so on. Indeed, even if they showed a certain interest in narrative and motion pictures, artists such as Paul-Armand Gette and Christian Boltanski, for example, ultimately preferred 16-mm film rather than video, even when the final quality sought by the artists did not visibly require professional film formats. For example, Boltanski's *L'homme qui tousse* ("The Coughing Man") from 1969 is a three-minute 16-mm film with poor image and sound quality. It could also be argued that 16-mm still offered the opportunity to work in color, which in video only became available in 1982. Nevertheless, it is telling that a number of French artists invited to participate in the exhibition were using video for the first time, with video equipment lent to them specifically for the purpose of making work for the show. In other words, many of the French works were commissions, and many of these artists never worked in video again, as for example, Gérard Calisti, Hessi, Patrick Hugues, Michel Kanter, Bertrand Lavier and Christian Tobas.

In her contribution to the exhibition brochure, the videographer and critic Dominique Belloir points out that French video production emerged relatively late on the scene in comparison with the United States, because US artists benefited from the affordability and availability of new audio-visual technology, as well as from a support system for video (a network of institutions, universities and televisions channels) that did not exist in France at the same period. As examples of support structures for video in the United States, Belloir mentions WGBH television station in Boston, KCED television station in San Francisco; WNET television

laboratory in New York; and The Kitchen, in New York.<sup>10</sup> She refers to opportunities for independent artists to show their video on private television channels, which was not an option for French artists. In *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, David Joselit addresses the relationship between early video production, in the US in the 1970s, and a privatized network of television channels that broadcast independent videos, be these by artists or media activists.<sup>11</sup> Despite his observation that the communities for whom these videos were intended rarely subscribed to these private networks because of socio-economic limitations, Joselit's analysis of these practices also suggests that the possibility of being shown on television created a dynamic that motivated the production of much early video production in the United States. Belloir's text nevertheless exaggerates the advantageous conditions for video in the United States; video was also expensive there, and institutional support structures were limited to just a few locations, spread mainly between Boston, New York and San Francisco. Moreover, France had similar structures, such as the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where Carole Roussopoulos and others were using video editing equipment at night, and the Service de la Recherche de l'ORTF, where the first experiments with video dated back to 1957. The Service de la Recherche de l'ORTF is today acknowledged as a major research institution in the fields of image and sound production and television, experimenting with video as well as with other technologies associated with images in motion, not only using the latest and most advanced video technology, but also contributing to its development. The "Movicolor", for example, a synthesizer for

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<sup>10</sup> Dominique Belloir, "Les artistes et la video," *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Joselit, "Feedback," *Feedback* (2007), 86-131.

colorizing and creating special effects on video, and major advancement in video technology, was invented there in 1973 by Marcel Dupouy. Paradoxically, the Service de la Recherche offered very limited creative freedom to its employees. It was a closed institution, not known to be particularly welcoming to independent visual artists; Martial Raysse, who started going there as early as 1960 to produce his video works, is a rare exception.<sup>12</sup> Raysse started going to ORTF in 1960, when he worked with 16-mm, then in 1964 with video. At the ORTF, Raysse worked on *Portrait électromachinchose* (1967) and *Camembert Martial extra-doux* (1969); both were recorded theatrical performances – surprisingly parodic, critical and anti-Pop in character considering the conventional reading of Raysse’s work with a derivative of US Pop Art. Nevertheless, the Service de la Recherche also trained a handful of independent visual artists, such as Robert Cahen, who realized his first video-based works there.

Although video technology was available on the US market several years earlier than in France, video was nevertheless practiced in France in the early 1970s and these productions already existed by the time of the exhibition in 1974. Forest was invited to participate in *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* with the Collectif d’art sociologique, founded that same year, but women’s collectives were not approached, despite the substantial content and quantity of their video production. The politicized engagement of these feminist collectives, their avowedly anti-institutional position, as well as the fact that their members did not present themselves as artists, clearly did not make them a viable option for the curators. Yet the latter’s disregard for militant

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<sup>12</sup> See Quenault, “Les intrusions au sein du Service de la Recherche,” in (PhD diss.) “Reconsidération de l’histoire de l’art vidéo,” 342-431.

video implied that video in France in the mid-1970s was almost totally nonexistent. Their decision not only determined the first major exhibition of video in France but also established a model for French institutional collections and scholarship in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

The curators of *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* organized the work into three independent sections: “Art Vidéo” (“Video Art”), “La Vidéo et les Artistes” (“Artists and Video”), and “Environnements” (“Environments”), which showed a diversity of artist’s approaches to video. The strongest US work was brought together under the remit of “Art Vidéo”; significantly, this was also the section with the least number of French artists. “Art Vidéo” showed a formalist approach to video that proposed a self-reflexive use of the medium; it also favored image manipulation, the use of electronic technology, and a connection to other artistic forms such as music and dance. Included in this section was Nam June Paik’s *Global Groove* (1973), with its visual experimentation with color variations and silhouetting of dancers (Fig. 49). “Art Vidéo” also included a significant number of videotapes by Steina and Woody Vasulka, including *Home* (1973), a synchronized group of graphically manipulated video images alluding to a domestic household, overlaid with repeated sounds from electronic music, the totality of which amounts to a video still life (Fig. 50). The second section of the exhibition, “La Vidéo et les Artistes”, grouped artists using the video camera as a tool to record “transient artistic actions”, performance and body art. The majority of French artists were included in this section, such as Gina Pane, whose videos *Auto-portrait* (1973) and *Psyche* (1974) are both based on recordings of her performances (Fig. 51). Regrettably, it is only in relationship to these videos that Carole

Roussopoulos is credited in the catalogue for her contribution to video and to the exhibition. Forest was also included in this section, where he presented his video *Les gestes du coiffeur* (1974), discussed in Chapter Two. Christian Boltanski showed videos based on his autobiographical performances: *La vie c'est gaie, la vie est triste* ("Life it's Happy, Life is Sad", 1974), which shows the artist simultaneously crying and laughing, and *Quelques souvenirs* ("Some Memories", 1974), a series of sketches played by the artist based on his own memories of a tormented childhood (Fig. 52). The US artists included in the section were Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Allan Kaprow and Bruce Nauman for their video work with happenings and performance. Acconci presented *Command Performance* (1973), a characteristically disturbing video in which the artist tries to engage viewers by verbally seducing and assaulting them, as if power could be exercised through the screen. Peter Campus showed *Three Transitions* (1973), which also addresses the screen as an interface and questions video's capacity to illustrate the self. Using various recording and editing techniques, Campus shows his body merging and disappearing into the screen (Fig. 53). Bruce Nauman presented *Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up Over Her* (1973), a recording of a woman performing mental exercises (conceived by Nauman in the late 1960s); she is shown concentrating to the point where she can imagine herself sinking into the floor or allowing the floor to rise up over her. The third and final section of *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, "Environnements", comprised screen-based works developed in video installations. Predictably, this section presented works by its pioneers, Nam June Paik and Dan Graham. Beyond engaging with the viewer's self-awareness in the exhibition space, many of these works addressed video's relationship with time and space. Graham's *Past Future Split Attention* (1972) (Fig. 54), a recording based on a performance at the Lisson Gallery in London,

involved two people commenting in real-time on each other's actions and words, drawing the viewer's attention to the temporal disjunction between past and future, as well as to the impossibility of reporting on or recording the present. Forest was also included in this section with *Socio-analyse de la circulation parisienne* ("Socio-Analysis of Parisian Traffic", 1974), an installation in which he recreated the type of closed-circuit video apparatus described in Chapter Two, and with which he had already experimented in Paris and São Paulo. Using video surveillance of a street projected inside the gallery, the artist analyzed Parisian traffic with a camera placed just outside of the museum, on Avenue President Wilson, recording activity on the street and transmitting it back to the museum in real-time. These works are just a representative selection of those chosen for each section of the exhibition; together, they show the lack of direction toward a specific theme and even less the presence of television as a target of artistic criticism. Instead, the exhibition seemed to promote the widest possible range of video practices and ways to experiment with the medium at the time.

Despite the curators' disregard for militant video production, most of the work in *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* had progressive intentions and a commitment to promoting a broader, more democratic use of the new medium, even beyond the visual arts. For example, the museum offered its visitors a number of educational activities and innovative video initiatives.

Unfortunately, the educational activities accompanying the exhibition have been poorly documented, and are mentioned only infrequently and inconsistently in the exhibition archive.<sup>13</sup>

Exhibition visitors were encouraged to experiment with video cameras and VCRs during free

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<sup>13</sup> Visual documentation is equally poor; there are only two installation shots, see Fig. 48.

workshops, led by an artist-technician hired specifically for the show. There was an extensive documentation area dedicated to video art, its artists, their productions and their catalogues. The exhibition archive contains an extensive list of published materials, which were most likely made available to viewers during the show. Organized into four sections, each list had its own coordinator. Section 1, “Les méthodes sociologiques d’enquêtes et de pédagogie” (“Sociological Methods, Surveys and Pedagogy”), coordinated by the art historian Jean-Marc Poinot, included documentation of works by Hans Haacke, Didier Bay, Ger Van Elk and Adrian Piper. Section 2, “L’Art comme animation, les stratégies de rencontre et d’échange” (“Art as Socio-Education, Meeting and Exchange Strategies”), organized by art critic François Pluchart, included Lygia Clark, Yayoi Kusama, Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, Michel Journiac and Fred Forest. Section 3, “Contre-information et guérilla idéologique” (“Counter-Information and Ideological Guerilla”), curated by the London-based Philippino artist David Medalla and Jorge Glusberg (director of CAYC, Centro de Arte y Comunicación, in Buenos Aires), included Hélio Oiticica, Tony Shafrazi, and Guerilla Art Action Group – a selection that makes the absence of militant feminist collectives even more conspicuous. This absence can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid local political issues, but it could equally be attributed to the fact that international curators would not have known about a local, underground militant scene. At any rate, it reveals the lack of French specialists on the subject of guerilla and counter-informational activities, since this section was the only one not organized by a French professional. Finally, Section 4, “Détournement culturel et pratique socio-critique” (“Cultural Détournement and Socio-Critical Practice”), coordinated by the art critic Jacques Soulillou, included information on Les Levine and Dan Graham, among others and was where one would find the broadest view of video practice, including sociological

and pedagogic projects, audience participation, militant and counter-informational video, and cultural and institutional criticism; the majority of these approaches were absent from the exhibition itself.

A series of conferences or *débat-rencontres* (“meeting-debates”) were also scheduled for the show, which intended to produce a discussion about video between specialists and the general public. The themes of these *débats* also revealed a more extensive understanding of video’s uses: “Public Access and Communitarian Television”, “Education and Creativity”, “Video in the Current Artistic Context”, and “Imagery and Imagination”. Notable invited speakers at this series of conferences included René Berger, Don Foresta, Pierre Restany, and Liliane Touraine – all mentioned in Chapter Two with regards to Forest’s work. A survey was also handed out to the visitors during the show, asking for their views on the exhibition, their own use of video, and their opinion about the appropriateness of video for the visual arts.<sup>14</sup> The answers were recorded alongside demographic information about the respondents, concerning their age, sex, and profession. Unfortunately the exhibition’s file does not contain or mention the

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<sup>14</sup> Questions asked include (my translation):

- How have you been interested in the exhibition?
- What section did you prefer: “Formal Video”, “Video and Artists”, or “Environments”?
- Do you think artists contribute to video? Or do you think video contributes to artists?
- Did you feel that you were a participant in the exhibition?
- Would you like videotapes to be shown as commonly as films? If yes, how and where?
- Do you think video offers more possibilities to art, education, sociology, or media?
- Have you ever used video equipment?
- If you were given the opportunity to use video equipment, what type of videotapes would you like to realize: a personal production (fictional or real), a survey-investigation, a documentary, an interview, or a testimony?

results of this survey; nor does it mention its goal or relevance within the overall exhibition project. In the early 1970s, in France, the use of surveys was relatively common in the cultural sector. In 1973, the Ministry of Culture and Communication had launched an extensive quantitative national survey “Pratiques culturelles des Français en 1974”, which addressed the cultural habits of the French population; with the aim of better accommodating its cultural needs. Ruth Erickson connects these state surveys with questionnaires simultaneously being produced by the Collectif d'art sociologique, in particular by Thenot. She argues that rather than using these methods to fix representations of society and culture, the artists used them to initiate exchange and to create counter-spheres of information.<sup>15</sup> Thenot was known for his *Questionnaires* (“Surveys”) that he conceived as an artistic practice. Surveys were also common in the practice of other artists, such as GRAV or Léa Lublin (discussed below); Les Insoumuses’ *Maso and Miso* also had handwritten texts asking the viewer of their video to formulate opinions, described in Chapter One.

According to Michel Fansten, one of the co-curators, the exhibition was a great success even if no information about the visitor attendance figures is available to substantiate this claim.<sup>16</sup> Yet it received very few reviews and their verdict was relatively critical.<sup>17</sup> In one of

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<sup>15</sup> Erickson, “Assembling Social Forms: Sociological Art Practice in Post-1968 France” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, in progress).

<sup>16</sup> Fansten, e-mail correspondence with the author, November 25, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> The section of the archives at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris dealing with the reception of the exhibition contains only a brief press release that was sent to the national press agency (Agence France Press) and a short review of the exhibition by Jacques Michel, “Le nouveau monde de l’art vidéo,” *Le Monde* (November 28, 1974), n.p. Not included in the

them, published in *Le Monde*, Jacques Michel describes the exhibition as suffering from a technophilia promoted by business: the use of video in the arts represented a futile and manipulative attempt by the industrial sector to forge an extra-utilitarian justification for itself. To a large extent, this negative response to the exhibition can be attributed to a climate of suspicion about the growth of technology. Michel's anti-Americanism was bolstered by the significant US representation in the exhibition, as well as the involvement of the American Center as co-organizer: for him, an embrace of technology and its impact on the global economy were synonymous with US imperialism. Michel explains: "It [the exhibition] is the discovery of a new unknown artistic land. It is possible to evaluate the breadth of this phenomenon that emerged on the other side of the Atlantic ["*outré-Atlantique*", referring to the United States] in the 1960s and developed in the 1970s with the American participation of the [American] Cultural Center of the rue du Dragon. The American economy specializes in the high-tech electronics industry and favors the development of art that uses it. With video, art is automatized."<sup>18</sup> His only positive statement concerned the relationship between video and performance and body art, although he also appreciated *Art sociologique* and *écologique* for their desire to counter global economic monopolies. René Berger's review "Art vidéo: défis et paradoxes", written on the occasion of the exhibition, barely acknowledges the show. The author instead offers an alternative classification of video art that has nothing to do with the categories used in *Art/Vidéo*

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archives of the exhibition is a more articulated article by René Berger, "Art vidéo: défis et paradoxes," *Art Press*, no. 13 (October-November 1974): 8-10. The same year, Berger published his first book on video, using this same title.

<sup>18</sup> Michel, "Le nouveau monde de l'art video," n.p. My translation.

*Confrontation*. Unlike Michel, however, Berger gives a more optimistic and constructive evaluation of the overall potential of video art, even if his tone is also marked by a latent anti-Americanism that was prevalent in the 1970s. Berger describes video artists as “pioneers of a new attitude or of a new era” and expresses his confidence regarding their desire and ability to overcome the monopoly of an enemy that he identifies as commercial television. According to Berger, all the video works he had seen presented the same “distance [*écart*], provoking the dissolution of the illusion of reality inherent to television”; this was the central challenge and paradox of video art, whose modesty of resources contrasted with the size and authority of its opponent.<sup>19</sup> Berger uses the term “*écart*”, which can be variously translated as “distance”, “variation” or “shift”.

Despite this meager critical feedback, *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* is a landmark exhibition, one of the first international surveys of video. In the history of French video art, it marks an attempt to institutionalize it as an artistic medium before it was even practiced by visual artists in the country. It was not until later, in the late 1970s and 80s, that a significant number of visual artists began to engage with this new medium.

#### **b. *Une expérience socio-écologique: Neuenkirchen (1975)***

Compared to the production and opportunities available in other countries, especially the United States and Canada, the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* seems to reveal a lack of

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<sup>19</sup> René Berger, “Art vidéo,” *Art Press*, 10. My translation.

interest in video among visual artists in France. Notwithstanding this apparent disinterest, another large exhibition involving video took place in Paris the following year, *Une expérience socio-écologique: photo, film, et video: Neuenkirchen 75* (“A Socio-Ecological Experience: Photo, Film and Video, Neuenkirchen 75”, hereafter referred to as *Neuenkirchen*), 1975, which presented French and German artists side by side. The show focused on “Art socio-artistique”, “Art socio-critique” and “Art socio-écologique”, trends that had originated in France in the early 1970s and which frequently deployed video. These artistic practices are still understudied and unacknowledged today, even in France.<sup>20</sup> Examples of these approaches to video include the artists Fred Forest, Hervé Fischer, and Jean-Paul Thenot (who formed the Collectif d’art sociologique in 1974); Robert Baladi, Léa Lublin, François Pain, and Nil Yalter as representatives of Art socio-critique; Jean-Paul Fargier and Danielle Jaeggi for Art écologique. Some of these artistic approaches had already been included in *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, but only through a handful of works by Baladi, Fischer, Forest and Thenot; moreover, they had been dispersed throughout the sections dedicated to “Video and Artists” and “Environments”, as opposed to the main section on “Video Art”. Obviously, works of Art sociologique and Art écologique were not yet clearly defined as a direction for video, unlike the clear designation of “Video Art”, which was defined as a formalist practice. In many ways, then, the self-reflexive approach of Video Art opposed a socio-artistic, critical, and ecological application for video, in which the main object of study was located outside of video itself, in the sitter and/or participant as well as in social networks, and in their related social critiques. Thus it was not until 1975, with

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<sup>20</sup> The best attempt to date to present them to date has been Ardenne, *Un art contextuel* (Flammarion, 2002).

the exhibition *Neuenkirchen* that a more cohesive definition for this type of work was formulated, and presented alongside related developments in photography and film.<sup>21</sup>

The exhibition *Neuenkirchen* was also organized by ARC 2, and took place at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris during November and December 1975. Suzanne Pagé (of ARC) curated it in collaboration with Pierre Gril of the Office Franco-Allemand pour la Jeunesse (or OFAJ, “Franco-German Office for Youth”), a bi-national governmental agency for the promotion of French and German cultural exchange. According to documents in the archive, and a brief comment in the exhibition catalogue, the idea for the *Neuenkirchen* project originated with Pierre Gril and OFAJ, who then proposed it to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The exhibition aimed to study the sociological context of Neuenkirchen, a tourist town near Hamburg, in Lower Saxony. French and German artists were invited to stay in Neuenkirchen for a three-week period during June 1975, and to collaborate with each other as well as with the citizens. The works they created – using photography, video or film – directly resulted from their experiences in the town; they addressed aspects of its creative context, the significance of the artists' presence in situ, as well as relevant encounters between the artists and the local population. The concept of a process-based exhibition, in which artists are invited to create work in situ as part of a collective experience, as well as the importance of dialogue and exchange as an artistic gesture, evokes more contemporary practices, particularly the exhibitions

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<sup>21</sup> The archives of the exhibition *Une expérience socio-écologique: photo, film, and video: Neuenkirchen* are held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. See Suzanne Pagé, Pierre Gril, and Bernard Teyssède, *Une expérience socio-écologique. Photo, film, vidéo: Neuenkirchen 75* (Paris: ARC 2, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1975).

of Eric Troncy and Nicolas Bourriaud, associated with Relational Aesthetics. In addition, underlying the project at Neuenkirchen was a diplomatic aim: to reinvigorate and promote the ideal of “Franco-German friendship”, which had frequently been tested by military and political opposition (from the First and Second World Wars to, most recently, political tensions regarding the financial position of the EU between Austerity – the position currently defended by Germany – and Economical Growth, a plan supported by newly elected socialist President François Hollande).

Amongst the participants were thirteen German and fifteen French artists, most of whom used photography rather than video or film. Among the French artists, or based in France, participating in the exhibition *Neuenkirchen* were Roland Baladi, Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Richard Gilles, Tomek Kawiak, Léa Lublin, Mileslay Moucha, Ernst Pignon, Frabizio Plessi, Anne and Patrick Poirier, Joan Rabascall, Sosno, Jean-Paul Thenot and Nil Yalter. The Collectif d’art sociologique was invited to the show and proposed a collective project in addition to individual works by each of the three members. Forest showed *Vidéo-gazette action de dynamisation sociale* (“Video-Gazette Action of Social Dynamization”) in which he recorded conversations with the population, while Fisher recreated a previous piece, *Pharmacie Fischer & cie* (“Fischer’s Pharmacy & Co.”), in which the artist dressed as a pharmacist and sold pills to passersby in the streets of Neuenkirchen (an action recorded on video by Forest) (Fig. 55). Thenot proposed *Contrat Socio-Thérapeutique* (“Socio-Therapeutic Contract”), a sociological survey of the town in which people were invited to write down their most pressing question on a form handed out to them; he then exhibited the numerous responses,

which reflected on the inhabitants' individual as well as collective hopes. The Collectif d'art sociologique's collaborative project was closely related to Thenot's work: *Conversations: Neuenkirchen est-elle un paradis?* ("Conversations: Is Neuenkirchen a Paradise?") was a dialogue developed with the town's inhabitants, based around the question in the title. The collective interviewed random passersby at the supermarket, in the parking lot, at the pharmacy and in the street (Fig. 56). The question functioned as an open call for the population to express their concerns about daily life and their residential situation. The conversations, in German, were recorded with video and the tapes were then shown in the exhibition as audio-visual material documenting the sociological action.<sup>22</sup>

Since many of the works in the exhibition involved direct interactions with the local population, were based on surveys, and consisted of collecting opinions, the artist Léa Lublin developed a similar project, *Qu'est ce que l'art* ("What is Art"), which involved asking passersby to answer questions – written on banners hung at the entrance to the town and in front of the supermarket – about the sociological potential of art (Fig. 57). The inhabitants' answers were also documented on video. By contrast, Roland Baladi decided to use video to study the structural topography and dynamic of the town. He equipped a motorcycle with a video camera, with which he captured six different perspectives on the town's architecture and geography. Nil Yalter proposed an installation composed of a short video, texts and two series of drawings and of gendered photographic portraits depicting a cleaning lady who worked for the local Gallery

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<sup>22</sup> A copy of this video is available at the INA Archives, but the recording's bad audio quality means that the details of the conversations remain difficult to follow.

Falazik and local men shooting guns in preparation for the annual village celebration, which documented some aspects of the town's social fabric and traditions (Fig. 58). Nil Yalter's best-known work drew attention to the life and culture of Turkish immigrants in France, especially women. Yalter often worked in collaboration with video artist Nicole Croiset, and both developed a socio-critical approach to video.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the most provocative and political piece in the exhibition was by the Paris-based Spanish artist Joan Rabascall, who took a helicopter trip around Neuenkirchen to locate the sites of former concentration camps, which had been numerous in this region of Germany, and which he documented in video and still photography. Rabascall then created postcards of these sites, which he left on a display in one of the town's tourist stores.

The few installation shots in the archive confirm that most of the work was photographic, displayed alongside some television monitors and the occasional video wall (Fig. 59). Included in the exhibition views, which were clearly taken during the private view, are a couple of photographs showing a protest by a small group of students; this occasionally happened in response to Art sociologique projects, and more generally, in response to art exhibitions in France during the early 1970s. One photograph shows a group of youngsters in the exhibition holding a banner above their heads, on which is written, "If we had the chance to study we wouldn't be here." Another photograph shows the same group sitting in front of a wall where photographs were hung, and clearly in discussion with the artists and the audience. The press coverage of the show was more extensive than that for *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*. Most of the

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<sup>23</sup> See Nil Yalter's website, <http://www.nilyalter.com/> (accessed January, 26 2012).

reviewers focused on exhibition's goal of forging interaction between the community of artists staying at Neuenkirchen and the town's inhabitants, but expressed doubts about the ability of art to successfully realize this communication. Many authors noted the pristine and orderly appearance of Neuenkirchen, which they expected the artists to comment upon and demystify.

*Neuenkirchen* was the second significant exhibition involving video that took place in a French art institution. It remains an isolated project, however, and no other national institutions on ARC's scale supported or showed works associated with Art sociologique, Art socio-critique or Art écologique, despite the fact that artists continued to develop their work on the same principles throughout the 1970s and 80s. The only exception is the exhibition *Art socio-critique* that was held much later, in 1982, at the Maison de la Culture of La Rochelle, during the multi-disciplinary Festival de la Rochelle; artists invited to this exhibition included Bernard Borgeaud, Nicole Croiset and Nil Yalter, Hans Haacke, Suzanne Lacy, Léa Lublin, Joan Rabascall, Jean Roualdès and Wolf Vostell. This was the final attempt to reinvigorate Art sociologique, Art socio-critique and Art écologique practices in an art institution in the 1980s – but these directions were probably considered too critical to receive extensive state support. Michel Fansten recalls that:

At the beginning of 1973, Jacques Duhamel was ill and resigned (from the French government, as well as from his position as Minister for Cultural Affaires that he occupied since 1971). In April 1973, Georges Pompidou nominated Maurice Druon as Minister of Cultural Affairs. One of his first speeches concerned these 'leftists' who live with State support and '[They] must choose between the wooden bowl [*sébile*, used in French to denote alms] and the Molotov cocktail.' Clearly, if I [as an artist] want to keep

my [production] budget, I must redirect my actions in a way that is less 'political' and more 'artistic'.<sup>24</sup>

This statement further proves the connection in France between institutional support and the nature of artistic production.

### **c. *Paris Biennials and Video Festivals (1975-85)***

The Paris Biennials between 1971 and 1982 are important markers in the history of exhibiting French video art. The first significant showing of video-based works occurred as early as 1971, at the Seventh Paris Biennial, but it was not until the 9<sup>th</sup> edition, in 1975, that an independent video section was created. Along with the Paris Biennials, video festivals helped to consolidate the idea of Video Art, and assisted the medium's institutionalization: blooming throughout France in the 1980s, but especially in provincial cities, video festivals encouraged large-scale production, and attempted to establish a nationwide network of commercial distribution. In this section I will discuss both of these phenomena in turn.

The Paris Biennial was established in 1959 by art critic Raymond Cogniat, best known as artistic director of the Gallery des Beaux-Arts at the time of the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* in 1938; André Malraux, then first Minister of Culture, supported the Biennial. It was an exhibition dedicated to contemporary practice by international artists under thirty-five years of age. As a result, the Biennial is a useful indicator of the state of international contemporary art; tracing the presence of video in the exhibition helps us to discern the degree to

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<sup>24</sup> Fansten, e-mail correspondence with the author, November 25, 2011. My translation.

which upcoming artists used the medium. The Eighth Paris Biennial, for example, took place in 1973 at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. In 1973, the Biennial had been relocated from the Parc Floral of Vincennes to a more central Parisian location, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which also reinforced the event's artistic identity. The previous Biennial, in 1971, had been highly criticized for its confusion between different genres and media, mixing visual art, cinema, and theater; it was also blamed for a lack of artistry and literacy.<sup>25</sup> This edition was representative of the organizer's desire to develop a more international exhibition; it not only continued to support the participation of international artists, as it had for previous editions, but also opened the exhibition's organization to foreign experts. These international experts tended to be the ones in charge of the video sections of the Biennial; this also suggests a shortage of French institutional specialists on video in the 1970s. The exhibition was traditionally organized according to a medium-based classification: its three sections were "Visual Arts" (painting and sculpture), "Technology" and "Cinéma". Video was presented in the "Cinema" section, which showed artists' and *auteur* films, and an insignificant number of videotapes by unknown videographers, whose content is almost impossible to reconstruct today. The "Cinema" section of the Eighth Biennial presented works by Ellen Auensen, Bertand Amiard, Daniel Bard, Luc Béraud, Vivianne Batholomié and the German group Telewissen (who created videotapes in collaboration with the audience). Also listed are twenty hours of video selected by Gain Ground and Bykert Galleries, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Brown University. Chantal Akerman participated in the exhibition with *La*

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<sup>25</sup> "Introduction," *8<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1973), n.p.

*chambre 1* and *La chambre 2*, realized in collaboration with Babette Mangolte. By contrast, the “Film d’artistes” section at the previous Biennial, curated by Alfred Pacquement in 1971, included only video-based works exclusively created by US artists: Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Serra, and Keith Sonnier. Neither of the Seventh or Eighth Biennials, nor later editions, ever included Art sociologique, Art socio-critique, Art écologique or the militant video that accompanied the development of video in France. This not only shows the lack of institutional support for these practices, but also explains why they did not find direct followers in subsequent generations.

This situation began to change at the Ninth Paris Biennial in 1975, which took place at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and at the nearby Musée Galliera. Douglas Davis, a US artist and critic specializing in video, digital art and interactivity, was invited to curate an independent video section. Although this suggests that by the mid-1970s video was perceived as a new medium for the visual arts in France, Davis’s catalogue essay expresses concerns about attempts to organize and classify video practices, as well as the value of creating the label “Video Art”, which he feared would limit and ultimately destroy video’s diversity.<sup>26</sup> He locates the beginning of Video Art as a distinct category: 1973 in the United States, and 1975 in France. Davis was also apprehensive about video being presented as the trendy “new thing to do” for artists and institutions. Unlike the “Cinema” section at the Eighth Paris Biennial, Davis presented

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas Davis, “Video in the mid-1970s: Beyond Left, Right, and Duchamp,” *9<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris* (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1975), n.p. As part of the institution’s aim to present the Paris Biennial as a more international contemporary art event, for the first time, the catalogue of the 9<sup>th</sup> edition is bilingual (French and English).

a coherent selection of video-based artworks that reflected his expertise, as well as being representative of the international currents in artistic production at the time. It included works by twenty-eight artists, this time split more equally between Europe and the US than in previous exhibitions; some of the best known included Bill Viola, Marina Abramovic, Valie Export, Antonio Muntadas, Christian Boltanski and Robert Cahen.<sup>27</sup> Davis's list represents a generation who went on to form the now acknowledged early international history of video, discussed later in this chapter.

The Tenth Paris Biennial, by contrast, was preoccupied with larger changes in French cultural policy that focused on cultural decentralization, an attempt to move artistic activity and production away from the capital to the French regions in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s; this involved a reorganization of funding and the development of an institutional infrastructure for contemporary art in cities outside of Paris. As a result, the 1977 Biennial took place simultaneously in Paris and two other provincial French cities: Strasbourg in the north east, near the German border, and Nice, in the South, on the French Riviera. In Paris the exhibition took place at the Palais de Tokyo (next door to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris), in Strasbourg at the Musée d'Art Moderne, and in Nice at the Galerie de la Marine and La Galerie

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<sup>27</sup> The full list of artists at the Ninth Paris Biennial is Marina Abramovic, Lynda Benglis, Christian Boltanski, Robert Cahen, Pinchas Cohen-Gan, Juan Downey, Michael Drucks, Valie Export, John Fernie, Kit Fitzgerald, Terry Fox, Hermine Freed, Rebecca Horn, Pierre-Alain Hubert, Wolf Knoebel, Darcy Lange, Barbara and Michael Leisgen, Urs Lüthi, Gordon Matta-Clark, Ronald Michaelson, Olivier Mosset, Misloslav Moucha, Antonio Muntadas, Hitoshe Momure, Jacques-Louis Nyst, François Pain, Friederick Pezold, Fabrizio Plessi, Ulrich Rosenbach, Keith Sonnier, Francesco Torres, William (Bill) Viola and William Wegman.

des Ponchettes.<sup>28</sup> This encouraged cultural decentralization by increasing exchange between center and periphery, as well as by expanding audiences for the exhibition. Here it is timely to note that feminist militant video, as well as Art sociologique, Art socio-critique, and Art écologique, had all been active in cities outside of Paris without waiting for institutions to set parameters for cultural decentralization. The Tenth Paris Biennial is an isolated example of the institution's engagement with cultural decentralization. The Eleventh and Twelfth editions exploded to a wide range of locations in Paris. In recent years, the Centre Pompidou has reactivated such models of cultural decentralization, the most significant examples being the Centre Pompidou Metz and the Centre Pompidou Mobile, which is advertised as the world's first nomadic museum.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, at the Tenth Paris Biennial, video was shown in an independent section both in Paris and Strasbourg (there is no mention of video presentation in Nice). In his introductory

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<sup>28</sup> Separate catalogues were published for the exhibition in Paris and Strasbourg: *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977); *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris à Strasbourg* (Strasbourg: Musée d'Art Moderne, 1977). No catalogue is documented for the exhibition in Nice. Art historian Rosemary O'Neil, a specialist of the French Riviera art scene, informs me that the exhibition in Nice was curated by Claude Fournet and included thirty two artists of thirteen nationalities, included Marc Devade, Jacques Martinez, Annette Messenger, Olivier Mosset, Eve Sonneman and Dominique Thiolat. Rosemary O'Neill, e-mail correspondence with the author, December 5, 2011. For more information on the Biennial in Nice see *Chroniques Niçoises: Génèse d'un Musée tome II, 1973-1990* (Nice: Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, 2001), 87. For a more general account of art on the French Riviera see Rosemary O'Neill, *Art and Visual Culture on the French Riviera, 1956-1971* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> See Centre Pompidou Metz, <http://www.centrepompidou-metz.fr/> (accessed July, 10, 2011) and the Centre Pompidou Mobile, <http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Communication.nsf/0/46FD004752A36AE9C1257918002D3C01?OpenDocument&L=1&L=1> (accessed July, 10, 2011).

remarks for the catalogue, Jean-Louis Faure, curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne of Strasbourg, cites video as a new media for the visual arts along with photography.<sup>30</sup> This comment reveals how a traditional view of artistic media still persisted in the late 1970s, in cities outside Paris; painting and sculpture were still considered to be the only real artistic media that audiences would prefer to see exhibited. This situation was a little better in Paris, but exhibitions of video were still rare. Faure's comment also reveals how video was integrated relatively rapidly into the visual arts by comparison to photography. Nonetheless, the fact that subsequent editions of the Paris Biennials continued to include a video section encouraged its use by visual artists, and the Eleventh and Twelfth Paris Biennials saw an exponential growth in the number of videos exhibited. French art critic Georges Boudaille (1925-91) curated the "Vidéo" section at the Eleventh Paris Biennial, in 1980, for example. It included a larger number of French artists using video than in the previous editions, some of whom became best known for Video Art, and were occasionally acquired by French institutions for their collections (Dominique Belloir, Patrick Bousquet, Robert Cahen, Sophie Calle, Nicole Croiset, Jean-Paul Fargier, Catherine Ikam, Danielle Jaeggi, Thierry Kuntzel, François Pain and Patrick Prado).

In the 1980s, as the practice of video production increased, video festivals also started blooming in France. Noticeably, they were exclusively located in medium sized cities outside of Paris, which were not originally associated with contemporary art, and even less so with new media art. One of the earliest and most respected of these festivals was the *Manifestation*

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<sup>30</sup> Jean-Louis Faure, "Introductory Remark," *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris à Strasbourg* (Strasbourg: Musée d'Art Moderne, 1977), n.p.

*Internationale de Vidéo de Montbéliard* (International Video Festival of Montbéliard) in Northeastern France, a city strategically located near the borders of Switzerland and Germany, which facilitated the festival's international dimension. Other video festivals began in France at the same period include the *International New Images Festival of Monte Carlo* (Monte Carlo, started in 1982), the festival *Vidéoocéanes: Rencontre Vidéo de Brest* at the Maison de la Culture in Brest (1983), the festival *Vidéoformes* of Clermont-Ferrand (1986, focused on video installation), and the *Festival Vidéo-Arts Plastiques* of Hérouville-Saint-Clair (1991, which specialized in the relationship between video and the visual arts).

The International Video Festival of Montbéliard most commonly known and hereafter referred to as the Montbéliard Festival, was an opportunity for videographers to present their works and for the festivalgoers to see new international productions. Most works presented at the festival were videotapes projected at specific screening hours, like movies. There were also a small number of video installations in the first editions of the festival, which eventually gradually increased in number as the practice of video installation developed within the decade. As Fargier recalled, it was “the ‘Cannes’ for video”.<sup>31</sup> The festival took place every two years, on the same years as the Paris Biennial; the first in 1982, the second in 1984, the third in 1986, and so on. The first edition of the Montbéliard Festival had no specific subject other than video, while the following editions had specific themes: “Nouvelles fictions” in 1984, and “Télévision” in 1986, clearly indicating trends within general video production. Additionally, the Montbéliard

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<sup>31</sup> Fargier, “Histoire de la vidéo française,” in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, 56. My translation.

Festival presented lectures, conferences, and a competition identifying the best video of the year. Forty videos and video-based artworks were presented in the first edition, in 1982, directed by artist and curator Pierre Bongiovanni; in its second edition, in 1984, Jean-Paul Fargier and Jean-Marie Duhard assisted Bongiovanni in the organization of the festival.

In general, the existing documentation available on these festivals, are of very limited interest. These catalogues offer very little interpretative material on the works; instead they are mainly programs, which simply list what was shown and a brief factual description of the video's content or narrative. Significantly, where one would expect to find an introductory essay and curatorial overview at the beginning of the catalogue, there are texts by French government representatives from the Ministry of Culture, promoting video and explaining the financial institutional support that could be obtained for practicing videographers. See for example, Dominique Wallon, "Introductory Notes," in the catalogue of the *2e Manifestation internationale de vidéo de Montbéliard* (1984); Wallon was, in 1984, Director of Cultural Development for the French Ministry of Culture.<sup>32</sup> In the 1980s, after Mitterrand's election and through the dynamism of Jack Lang (Minister of culture, 1981-6 and 1988-92) the French government provided significant funds for video. It was part of the general budget growth for culture that served the

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<sup>32</sup> Dominique Wallon, "Introductory Notes," in *2e Manifestation internationale de vidéo de Montbéliard* (Montbéliard: Manifestation internationales de vidéo, 1984), 8. See also additional texts in this same edition of the catalogue: "La politique audiovisuelle du Ministère de la Culture," 10-2. Also emanating from the Regional Direction of Telecommunications of Franche-Comté (the region where Montbéliard is located) the text "Un nouvel enjeu pour la France: les vidéocommunications," 16. This latter text also expanded on the industrial and commercial potential of video.

entire field of culture in France, in the 1980s, with the creation of artistic institutions, grants for artists, and Great Projects commissioned by the President.

However, the activity of these video festivals significantly declined in the 1990s as the medium became more and more institutionalized, acquired by and shown in museums, as well as promoted in galleries. This shift from festival to museum resulted in work developing in the direction of video installation, as will be discussed below. This move also reflected the passage from video being screened on schedule in movie theaters to being shown uninterruptedly in a loop in the exhibition spaces of museums. The French debate around “Cinéma d’exposition” (“Exhibition Cinema”) crystallized this moment in the late 1990s when the white cube frequently became a black box, and the screen was used as a common display mode for projections of video by visual artists in museums and galleries.<sup>33</sup> These works generally show an interest in narrative and notions of time and space. As of today there are only two remaining active video festivals in France: Clermont-Ferrand and Hérouville-Saint-Clair, they show video in the form of projected image, video installation and digital art.

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<sup>33</sup> This concept of Cinéma d’exposition, much discussed in France in the 1990s, anticipates subsequent discussions in the US on the notion of “Projected Image”, developed in a series of round-table discussions organized by the journal *October*, no. 104, in Spring 2003. On Cinéma d’exposition see: Jean-Christophe Royoux, “Cinéma d’exposition,” *Art Press* 262 (November 2000): 26-41. Other articles in this same issue of *Art Press* were addressing similar notion of Cinéma d’exposition: Jean-Yann Beauvais, “Démonter le Cinéma,” (42-7) and Raymond Bellour “La querelle des dispositifs” (48-52). Previous discussions leading to the notion of Cinéma d’exposition can be found in the following exhibition catalogues: Raymond Bellour, *Passage de l’image* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou), 1990; and Raymond Bellour and Yann Beauvais, *Projections, les transports de l’image* (Le Fresnoy: Le Fresnoy Editions), 1997.

#### **d. *Les Immatériaux* (1985)**

It is worth closing this brief exhibition history of the early stages of the institutionalization of video and screen-based artistic practices in France with a consideration of the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* (“Immaterials” or “Non-Materials”, 1985), organized by the Centre de Création Industrielle at the Centre Georges Pompidou and curated by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. François Barré and François Mathey founded the CCI (Centre de Création Industrielle, “Center for Industrial Creation”), in 1969, at Union centrale des arts décoratifs (Ucad), in Paris. In the early 1970s, both Barré and Mathey participated in the discussions that resulted in the creation of the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris. In 1972, the CCI was integrated into the Centre Pompidou’s project; and, in 1976, the CCI became one of the two Departments of the Centre Pompidou, the other being the Musée National d’Art Moderne, also that year the CCI was relocated to the Centre Pompidou. The CCI’s mission is to constitute a collection and organize exhibitions about 20<sup>th</sup> century art and culture that focuses on the relationship between art and industry; its first exhibition, on design, took place in 1970, and since then it has organized exhibitions about fashion, architecture, urbanism, and technology.

Since the late 1970s, Lyotard had been well known for his theorization of the “postmodern condition”: a state of contemporary awareness in which everything surrounding man was understood to be part of a system of “grand narratives” (progress, technology, truth, history, etc.) constructed by man and taking the form of institutions, scientific knowledge and the arts.<sup>34</sup> In addition to his writing Lyotard was a practicing photography; less known is the fact that

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<sup>34</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne* (1979).

he also occasionally used video in the framework of ORTF.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Jean Baudrillard's pessimistic views on the future of human society in late capitalism, in which our consciousness of reality is replaced by hyperreality, a world of simulacra, Lyotard embraced many aspects of the postmodern condition (including simulation) as potentially creative and as a new enlightenment. Lyotard's exhibition *Les Immatériaux* has been discussed in relationship to its status as artistic and curatorial formulation of a philosophical concept: the "Postmodern condition".<sup>36</sup> For me, this exhibition is notable for offering an experience to the viewer that addressed, in many different ways, the relationship between the viewer and the screen. As such, *Les Immatériaux* made a major contribution not only to the history of exhibitions, but also to theories of spectatorship.

For Lyotard, "The exhibition attempts to characterize an aspect of our contemporary situation associated with the new technological revolution. Whereas mechanical servants hitherto rendered services, which were essentially 'physical,' automata generated by computer science and electronics can now carry out mental operations [...]. Yet technology is not the cause of the

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<sup>35</sup> Examples of Lyotard's involvement with video are compiled in Quenault, "Reconsidération de l'histoire de l'art vidéo," 450-5.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Blistène, "A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard," *Flash Art*, no. 121 (March 1985): 39. In this interview, Lyotard spoke about his ambition to not only formulate his ideas with writing but also with other modes of communication, the exhibition being one of them. For a discussion of philosophers formulating artistic and curatorial concepts, see Elisabeth Lebovici, Didier Semin, and Ramon Tio Bellido, eds., *La place du goût dans la production philosophique des concepts et leur destin critique* (Châteaugiron: Les Archives de la critique d'art, 1992). For more the relationship between art and philosophy in *Les Immatériaux*, see John Rajchman, "Les Immatériaux or How to Construct the History of Exhibitions," *Tate Papers*, no. 12 (2009).

decline of the modern figure; rather, it is one of its signs.”<sup>37</sup> This conclusion is similar in many ways to Marshall McLuhan’s understanding of the creation of the media and of their evolution as extensions of man, totally dependent from and relevant to him. Despite the placement in an art institution, the exhibition presented few objects identified as works of art and, those that were shown were rather difficult to locate due to the profusion of objects, materials, machines, screens and documents presented along with them.<sup>38</sup> Some of the identifiable works of art and artists included in *Les Immatériaux* were Moholy Nagy, Marcel Duchamp, Daniel Buren, Jacques Monory, Takis, Giovanni Anselmo, Lucio Fontana’s *Ambienze Spaziale* (1966), Dan Flavin’s *Four Neons* (1968), Joseph Kosuth’s *Five Words in Five Orange Colors* (1972), Dan Graham’s *Glass Panel + Mirror* (1973), and ancient Egyptian bas-reliefs (n.d). These were shown alongside vernacular photography, synthetic skin, frozen food, holograms, an interactive floor chessboard, music video, musical scores, televisions, computers, Minitels, etc. Antony Hudek has argued that Bernard Blistène, Conservator at the Centre Pompidou, was primarily responsible for selecting the works of art in the exhibition. However, it is known that the Egyptian bas-relief was Lyotard’s choice, and it is generally assumed that he would have also selected Duchamp, Buren, and Monory based on his extensive writings already dedicated to these artists. The performance and video choreographer Johannes Birringer noted that

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “*Les Immatériaux*,” *Art & Text*, no. 17 (April 1985): 51.

<sup>38</sup> Antony Hudek, “Form Over- to Sub-Exposure: The Anamnesis of *Les Immatériaux*,” *Tate Papers*, no. 12 (2009).

*Les Immatériaux* was indeed meant to create an interactive environment for conceptual explorations of our world, a ‘reality’ no longer securely representable in human or artistic terms but increasingly dependent upon immanent techno-scientific operations. *Les Immatériaux*, in other words, was not an exhibition that exhibited anything (at least of all paintings). It was a provocation to the mechanism of viewing art in a museum as well as to any aesthetic or art-historical narrative based on anthropocentric and historicist notions of continuity and tradition.<sup>39</sup>

To some extent it can be argued that *Les Immatériaux* shared similarities with Forest’s use of interactive technology in an artistic context: both intended to create a viewing experience that contrasted with the usual viewer-receiver position usually found in museums. For both also, the aim was to develop a model of spectatorship resulting from a participatory process, rather than conveying a clear and explicit content or message to the viewer. However, they differ in that Forest always conceives the participation of the viewer as resulting in the production of a collective work of art; Lyotard, by contrast, ideally wanted individual experience and knowledge about contemporary society to be gained from the exhibition.

*Les Immatériaux* presented a diversity of domestic and technological appliances, most of them incorporating a screen – TVs, Minitels (a computerized data service), VCRs, computers, projectors, Xerox machines, microwave ovens, sound synthesizers, etc. – which the visitor was invited to manipulate in the exhibition (Fig. 60). Some of these ‘machines’ were already in common use in the 1980s – television, microwave ovens, and to some extent even the Minitel, which was released just three years earlier and distributed for free to any telephone subscribers of the PTT (French National Telecommunication Company, which had the monopoly of the

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<sup>39</sup> Johannes Birringer, “Overexposure: *Les Immatériaux*,” *Performing Arts Journal* 10, no. 2 (1986): 8.

national phone system). Since most households in the mid-1980s had a home phone, pretty much everyone was eligible for a free Minitel – although the service was not free, as customers would be billed for the cost of services other than those provided by the phone company itself. One of the most popular free Minitel services was access to a database of the national phonebook; it was followed in popularity by a messaging and dating service called “Minitel rose”, which prefigured Internet pornography. The other “machines” in the exhibition were still rarely found in everyday life, and presented an operational challenge to the audience, such as the computer. Even though computers were introduced in most public schools as a pedagogical tool as early as 1981, by the mid-1980s it was far from being the domestic device it is today; instead the computer was almost exclusively used in professional settings.

It is not unimportant that the exhibition was organized at the time of a public debate about technology. In France, due to an ongoing poor economic situation that increased the rate of unemployment in the mid-1980s, the introduction of new technology and the mechanization of society was often equated with the threat of job loss and further hardship for a populace who feared that its livelihood would be replaced by robots. This was in direct contrast to the unconditional support that the French government had shown, since the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s, for placing technology in everyday life. The Nora-Minc report “The Computerization of Society” (1978) was instrumental for President Giscard d’Estaing’s

government, projecting economic growth as a result of a greater implementation of new technologies.<sup>40</sup>

Lyotard intended the exhibition to offer opportunities for the viewer to experiment with “situations” that he called “immatériaux” (or non-material). This was achieved by manipulating machines, experimenting with interactivity, as well as freely circulating through the exhibition’s differently defined zones (Fig. 61). Metal grids hanging from the ceiling and a dramatic lighting, broadly delineated around seventy zones. Birringer describes the experience of walking through the exhibition:

When I visited *Les Immatériaux* [...], I felt as if I had walked into a theatre. Upon entering a long, airport-like tunnel, I was given a set of headphones [...], I first heard a long electronic hum in my ears, followed by a dramatically recited fragment from Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, a convulsed monologue of an ‘I’ who can neither speak nor remain silent. But when I looked, I found myself in a dark mirrored vestibule, entitled ‘Theatre of the Non-Body.’ Apart from my headphoned reflection in the mirror, there were five dioramas displaying images of stage sets evacuated and empty but for imperceptible shifts in the lighting.<sup>41</sup>

The different zones of the exhibition were filled with a diversity of information and materials, whose relationships were unclear – from visual to audio, tactile to olfactory, tools to electronics, artifacts to art objects. This profusion contributed to the open-endedness of the overall project, while also engaging the viewer in a rich phenomenological experience. Nathalie Heinich, a

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<sup>40</sup> Simon Nora and Alain Minc, *L’informatisation de la société* (1978), discussed above in Chapter Two. When it was published, the Nora-Minc report quickly became a best seller. See Andrée Walliser, “Le rapport ‘Nora-Minc.’ Histoire d’un best-seller,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, no. 23 (July-September 1989): 35-47.

<sup>41</sup> Birringer, “Overexposure,” 7.

sociologist, in charge of conducting statistical surveys for the Centre Pompidou's audience from 1981 to 1989, concluded that its most striking character in *Les Immatériaux*

was the dramatic variety and instability of perceptions and reactions, from one visitor to another and even, sometimes, from one moment to another, for the same visitor. (I found that the same phenomenon appeared in journalists' reviews of the exhibition published in newspapers). [...] The difficulty to formulate a firm opinion, to know 'what one should think about it,' is particularly pronounced in front of something new.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond Lyotard's content and way of presenting it to an audience, some aspects of the exhibition's organization also reinforced the viewer's open-ended experience. The visitor's route was undirected, with no ideal path indicated. This created the general impression of the exhibition as a labyrinth, arranged around a system of intersections where the viewer was offered many possible paths. Some visitors might see the same zones multiple times, or might also unintentionally miss parts of the exhibition. Either way, it ensured that each viewer saw their own exhibition, and experienced their own "immatériaux", ultimately reinforcing Lyotard's point about the breakdown of grand narratives, but on the scale of an exhibition. In many respects the position offered to the viewer in *Les Immatériaux* was similar to the one of an investigator or researcher, recalling other spectatorial positions, such as the flâneur's participant-observation (described by Charles Baudelaire in the 1850s) or the Situationist *dérive* (theorized by Guy Debord in the 1950s-60s). Forest's concept of sociological walks in the 1970s shows a similar

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<sup>42</sup> Nathalie Heinich, "Les Immatériaux Revisited: Innovation in Innovations," *Tate Papers*, no. 12 (2009). Heinich was a student of Pierre Bourdieu, whom she later criticized. She is currently Research Director at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique).

interest in this type of spectatorship based on learning by means of wandering, but is always conceived by Forest as an exclusively collective experience.

Heinich points out that *Les immatériaux* had no guided tours scheduled during the exhibition, which were – then as now – a common feature of French museums in the mid-1980s. The exhibition was at pains not to impose an external or fixed interpretation on the visitor's understanding and experience. Heinich also explains that the Walkman audio-tour, which was compulsory for all visitors, “did not provide any direct ‘explanation’ of what the visitor had in sight, but rather unidentified fragments of discourses [quotes from Beckett, Barthes, fragments of conversation, music, etc.] indirectly related to what there were supposed to comment on”.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, since the viewers' movements in the exhibition were not directed by the curator and were therefore random, the order in which he/she would discover sections of the exhibition could not be synchronized with the recorded content. Thus, the audio was a soundtrack for the exhibition that functioned as an additional artistic and curatorial proposition, rather than an explanation of specific works, as would be expected of an audio-tour. Furthermore, using headphones isolated the viewer from other visitors and other distractions, and facilitated an immersive experience.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

Nor did the two catalogs published on the occasion of the exhibition provide any real clarification of the curator's project.<sup>44</sup> Instead, these took their lead from the exhibition and presented even more information and documentation, organized according to sections that referred back to visibly unconnected zones in the exhibition: "Deuxième peau" ("Second Skin"), "Infra-Mince" ("Infra-Slim"), "Matériaux dématérialisés" ("Dematerialized Materials"), "Tous les bruits" ("All the Noises"). This resulted in confusing the viewer even more. The first catalog provided a diary or "making-of of the exhibition", as Heinich describes it, enumerating the various zones of the exhibition. The second was a printed edition of experimental writing organized in relationship to the show, consisting of collaborations with writers, linguists, philosophers, physicians, biologists, etc. Participants had to agree to communicate at distance, using computers and a software that anticipated email, to discuss themes that had been decided by the curator in relationship to the exhibition. These same articles formed a database of answers available as videotext on the Minitels in the exhibition, and potentially in each home that was equipped with that system. Heinich also observed that "group discussions were organized outside of the exhibition space, after the visit, for those who wanted to discuss with a guide, what they had seen, heard, thought and experienced."<sup>45</sup> This new type of mediation with the viewer fostered a rather analytical relationship with the exhibition". All in all, this strategy of isolated viewing helped formulate Lyotard's vision of the ideal viewer as an independent investigator and

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<sup>44</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Les Immatériaux: Petit Journal* (Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985); and Jean-François Lyotard, *Les Immatériaux. Epreuve d'écriture, album et inventaire* (Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985).

<sup>45</sup> Heinich, "Les immatériaux" (2009).

autonomous participant, intellectually and creatively involved in the formation of the exhibition's meaning.

Like Forest's early works, Lyotard did not intend to establish his own position on contemporary art, life, society, or technology with this exhibition; instead he created a space of reflection, investigation and eventually of discussion. Rather than contributing to another "grand narrative", the show expressed neither technophobia nor technophilia. Instead, this was left to the viewer's own judgment and varied from one visitor to another. With *Les immatériaux*, Lyotard acknowledged the significance of technology as a mediating force in contemporary life. After viewing the exhibition, Birringer was nevertheless critical of his approach towards technology: "In all five paths of the exposition, the most diverse 'messages,' from holograms to fast food, from music video or computer music to synthetic skin or olfactory simulacra, were shown to be artificial replacements of/for the human body and its material activities."<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, independent curator and art critic Ramon Tio Bellido was more seduced: "The general invitation that emanated [from the exhibition] seemed close to what one would feel when 'charmed' by an unknown mode of communication, [a feeling] not far from a fairyland or from an 'artificial' whole."<sup>47</sup> Both, however, agreed that in *Les immatériaux*'s emphasis on artificiality, Lyotard was underscoring a significant aspect of the Postmodern condition, albeit a captivating and alarming one.

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<sup>46</sup> Birringer, "Overexposure," 10.

<sup>47</sup> Tio Bellido, e-mail correspondence with the author, December 4, 2011. My translation.

*Les Immatériaux* became a major point of reference for French artists of the younger generation, such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, whose works are discussed in Chapter Four. Born in the 1960s and beginning their artistic careers in the late 1980s, these artists have frequently referenced this exhibition as important for their interest in the exhibition as medium.<sup>48</sup>

## 2. Defining Video Art

However, before considering artistic and curatorial projects by these artists in the 1990s, and in order to better understand other stages of video's institutionalization, I will now turn to an analysis of how video art came to be qualified as "Video Art", a stylistic category for the visual art in the 1980s. In the process of institutionalizing video, a couple of museum exhibitions in the mid-1970s, discussed above, were foundational to prompting an institutional interest in video: *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, in 1974, and *Neuenkirchen*, in 1975. The early support shown for video at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, did not continue in the following decades and, as most institutions in France and abroad, it is only in the mid-1990s that the museum started acquiring video-based works for its collections. However, as the practice of video slowly expanded throughout France, this trend also became visible in curatorial selections for the Paris Biennial, especially its Ninth edition in 1975, where video was presented as an independent

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Collaborating on Utopia. Interview with Pierre Huyghe," *Flash Art* (July-September 2002): 76. Blistène, "A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard," 136.

medium for the first time, separated from film and experimental cinema. This was further consolidated by the birth of video festivals all over France. However, it was at the turn of the 1980s that the next stage of video's institutionalization really took place, with a more concerted effort to develop organizations dedicated to housing video. The Département Nouveaux Médias at the Centre Pompidou is fully representative of this: a pioneering institute for video production and promotion in France, it provided a showcase for Video Art, while its activities included the acquisition of videotapes and video-based art for the Collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne. Also in the early 1980s, this effort toward institutionalization was nourished and facilitated by an unprecedented profusion of writings on video by French scholars such as Dany Bloch and Anne-Marie Duguet, discussed below. This contributed to a consensual definition of Video Art from the standpoint of the institution, deployed throughout the 1980s.

**a. Département Nouveaux Médias and Collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou**

A crucial stage in the French institutionalization of video was the creation of a Département Nouveaux Médias at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which specialized in video and screen-based practices, including video installations and interactive environments. Surprisingly, the Département Nouveaux Médias was not involved in any aspect of the organization of Lyotard's exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, which was organized by CCI. This tells us about the level of fragmentation between different departments in such large institutions, which rarely collaborate with one another. When the Centre Pompidou officially opened to the public in

1977, video was already somewhat identified as a medium for arts; it was first included by default into a large department that grouped together photography, film and video. This allowed video to be first shown in the Centre Pompidou's projection rooms based on display modes inspired by film and that involved viewing times and fixed seating. However, when Christine Van Assche arrived at the Centre at the beginning of 1980, she requested that video be included within Department of Visual Arts and therefore to be shown in the museum's exhibition galleries.<sup>49</sup> Before working at the Centre Pompidou, Van Assche studied Art History and Contemporary Art. She was a student of film director and critic Eric Rohmer, from whom she learned film editing and studio work, which she recalls as a significant experience in her education. In 1980, this shift from theatre projection to exhibition gallery freed the viewer from an assigned temporality and restricted physical experience in relation to the screen. These parameters for viewing video prompted, in 1980s, the creation of the Département Nouveaux Médias.

With Christine Van Assche still as Chief Curator, the Département Nouveaux Médias has contributed to the recognition of video art by locating it with the visual arts, while also constructing a definition and history of Video Art in France. Today the museum's collection of video is presented one of the museum's galleries, in free access on computer monitors. The new media collection at the Centre Pompidou is today considered one of the best of its kind in the world: not only one of the oldest but also the most developed collections, it enables us to reconstruct an international history of video and screen-based artistic practices from its pioneers

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<sup>49</sup> Information collected from Christine Van Assche, interview with the author, Paris, June 21, 2011.

to the present day. This is especially true if one considers that most international museums waited until much later, often until the 1990s, before starting to acquire video for their permanent collections. The Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris only began to purchase video art in the mid-1990s, while the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York, and at the Tate Gallery, in London were similarly slow. Noah Horowitz, in *Art of the Deal*, dedicates his first chapter to "Video Art", focusing on its institutional history in the United States and in Britain, with a few examples in Germany.<sup>50</sup> He explains that, in these countries, the institutionalization of video began discreetly in the 1980s, but reached its full expression only in the 1990s. The collections of the Whitney and the Tate generally followed this same pattern, with very few acquisitions of video art in the early 1970s (at the Tate only), very few in the 1980s (both Whitney and Tate), and a dramatic increase after the mid-1990s at both museums. Along with the Département Nouveaux Médias at the Centre Pompidou, a handful of other institutions in Europe were acquiring video and new media art for their collections as early as the late 1970s: the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; the Kunsthauses in Zürich; the Kunstmuseum in Basel; and the Ludwig Museum in Cologne.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See Noah Horowitz, "Video Art" and "Appendix B: The Film and Video Collections of Tate Gallery and the Whitney Museum for American Art," *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011): 26-86.

<sup>51</sup> The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Kunstmuseum in Basel have not published yet a catalogue on their video collections. For the Kunsthauses in Zürich and the Ludwig Museum in Cologne there are catalogues available: Friedemann Malsch, Ursula Perucchi-Petri and Dagmar Streckel, *Künstler-Videos: Entwicklung und Bedeutung. Die Sammlung der Videobänder des Kunsthauses Zürich* (Zurich Kunsthauses and Cantz Verlag, 1996); and Barbara Engelbach, *Bilder in Bewegung Künstler & Video/Film 1958-2010* (Cologne: Ludwig Museum and Walther König Verlag, 2010).

So what narrative does the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou tell? The first video installation to enter the collection was Dan Graham's *Present Continuous Past(s)*, created in 1974 and acquired in 1976 (Fig. 62); and the oldest piece in the collection is Paik's *Moon is the Oldest TV* (1965) (Fig. 63), acquired by the Département Nouveaux Médias in 1985. It was Pontus Hultén (1924-2006), Swedish art historian, curator, and first director of the Centre Pompidou (1974-81), who proposed and secured the acquisitions of these early works by Graham and Paik.<sup>52</sup> According to Van Assche, the highlights of the collection are Nauman's *Going Around the Corner* (1970), Acconci's three videos *Remote Control* (1971), *Body Building in the Great Northwest* (1975), and *American Gift* (1976), as well as *Interface* by Peter Campus (1972), and *Video Fish* by Nam June Paik (1979).<sup>53</sup> By 2006, the video and new media collection at the Centre Pompidou comprised 85 installations and 1200 videotapes. As this selection indicates, the first video-based works acquired for the collections of the Musée National were by US artists, not French, and to this day the majority of the video-based works in the collection are by US artists.

It is striking that there are few video works by French artists in this collection, in particular from the 1970s and 80s, and that they were acquired long after they had been created. They are representative of a diversity of practices by French artists using video, including the Internationale Lettriste, Fluxus, Body art and performance, 'Art socio-critique', Video Art, and few other independent figures including filmmakers practicing video: Jean-Christophe Averty,

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<sup>52</sup> Christine Van Assche, interview with the author, Paris, June 21, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Christine Van Assche, "Aspects historiques et muséographiques des œuvres nouveaux médias," in: *Collection Nouveaux Médias. Installations*, 2006, 16.

Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Serge Comte, Gérard Fromanger, Paul-Armand Gette, Jean-Luc Godard, Ange Leccia, Luc Ferrari, Chris Marker, Gina Pane and Hervé Télémaque. Isodore Isou, Michel Jaffrenou (representing the Internationale Lettriste); Robert Filliou, Louis Cane, Jean Dupuy (representing Fluxus); Jean-Paul Fargier, Léa Lublin, Nil Yalter (Art socio-critique); Robert Cahen, Thierry Kuntzel, and Dominique Belloir (a medium-specific approach to video in the 1980s). In the 1990s, the situation for some French artists improved because art schools, art centers, museums, and galleries channeled emerging artists using video and new media art to museums; this system was not inclusive, however, and as a result left other artists on the margins. Contemporary French artists using video, acquired for the new media collection, include Boris Achour, François Curlet, Cyprien Gaillard, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Laurent Grasso, Clarisse Hahn, Pierre Huyghe, Pierre Joseph, Matthieu Laurette, Philippe Parreno and Pierrick Sorin.

Looking at the choices made for the new media collection, it is telling that militant video and Art sociologique from the 1970s, which are also the most radical, have been ignored. Until 2012, the only exception was *Jean Genet parle d'Angela Davis* (1970) a video by Carole Roussopoulos, acquired for the new media collection in 2001. It was the only militant video in this collection; it was also the only militant video by a female videographer that is in a French public collection. Created prior to her involvement with feminist collectives, it is also Roussopoulos's least political work. In 2012 and attesting of the recent interest by the Centre Pompidou for this production, the video *Maso et Miso vont en Bateau* (1976) by the collective Les Insoumuses has just been acquired for the collection Nouveaux Médias. However, clearly, the collection was never intended to reflect the current national production of video, but rather

to present a broad international survey of screen-based artistic practices. Similar observations are reached regarding the video collection at the Kunstmuseum in Basel. When the collection started in 1977 only US video was acquired (Acconci, Nauman, Warhol), and it is only in the 1990s that a larger proportion of Swiss artists entered the collection. By contrast, the Whitney Museum and the Tate Gallery placed early on an emphasis on showing and supporting their respective national artists. The first acquisition of video at the Tate Gallery was a work by Gilbert & George (bought in 1972); the Whitney bought works by Nam June Paik (1982) and Mary Lucier (1983).<sup>54</sup> The collection at the Centre Pompidou gathered together works to produce a history of video that was gradually defined as Video Art, a category that originated with, and is best exemplified by, US artists. Van Assche explains that to a certain extent the collection is also representative of what was available on the video market at specific periods: by the early 1980s, US video was easily available, easy to acquire, and relatively cheap. By contrast, French artists were less visible, due to their disorganized distribution. She mentions additional difficulties with regard to militant video, which due to the sensitive nature of its content raised legal issues based on the French law of “Droit à l’image” (image permission), which requires that all participants in audio-visual productions must give consent for the use of his or her image.<sup>55</sup> The “Droit à l’image” applies to certain countries, including France, but does not exist in the United Kingdom; it exists in the United States but was not as regulated in the

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<sup>54</sup> See Horowitz, “Appendix B,” *Art of the Deal*, n.p.

<sup>55</sup> Christine Van Assche, interview with the author, Paris, June 21, 2011.

1970s as it was already in France. Generally, militant and Art sociologique artists failed to comply with this regulation and failed to obtain participants' consent.

Despite these gaps in the new media collection, its works can be assessed on the basis of five themes, proposed as different sections in the national and international touring exhibition of the Nouveaux Médias collection organized by Van Assche in 2007.<sup>56</sup> Firstly, "Toward an Imaginary TV" groups together works that criticize television and/or offer utopian alternatives to it; this includes videos by Paik, Valie Export, Filliou, Dara Birnbaum, Viola and Laurette. "Search for Identity" refers to video installations that often use the screen as a window or a mirror to address issues of identity; this includes works by Graham, Raysse, Nauman, Acconci and Campus. A third theme is "After Cinema", focusing on video practices of the 1980s and 90s that deconstruct cinematic narratives (Kuntzel, Godard, Douglas Gordon, Huyghe and Ugo Rondinone). "World's Vision" addresses identity and politics, and includes the work of Chris Marker and Walid Raad. Finally, "Prospective Research" alludes to works based on imaginary and improbable world visions by contemporary artists, exemplified by French artist Laurent Grasso. Although the collection is overall very male oriented, a larger proportion of women's work has been acquired since the 1990s.

For Van Assche, the most important French work in the collection is the video production of Jean-Luc Godard.<sup>57</sup> Around thirty videotapes by Godard are part of the collection, which

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<sup>56</sup> Van Assche, "Aspects historiques et muséographiques," 15-31.

<sup>57</sup> Christine Van Assche, interview with the author, Paris, June 21, 2011.

represents almost his entire production in this medium. Unlike his œuvre as a filmmaker, Godard's video work is not widely known. In my view, it would be an interactive video installation by the Nouveau Réaliste and Pop artist Martial Raysse, *Identité, maintenant vous êtes un Martial Raysse* ("Identity. Now you are a [work by] Martial Raysse", hereafter referred to as *Identité*) (Fig. 64). Created by Raysse in 1967, it was added to the new media collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1991. It was first shown in the exhibition *Cinq tableaux, une sculpture* ("Five Paintings, One Sculpture") at the Alexandre Lolas Gallery in Paris, in April-May 1967. This piece is clearly the first video installation ever created in France, and one of the first closed-circuit video installations produced internationally. Furthermore, preparatory sketches by Raysse on his project *Identité* attest that it was conceived by the artist as early as 1965, but only realized for exhibition in 1967. According to Iles in *Into the Light* (2001), the first closed-circuit installations in the United States, by Graham, Campus, and Nauman were created later, around 1968-69. In the mid 1960s, Raysse had already experimented with incorporating Super 8 projections with his paintings – as in *Suzanna Suzanna* (1964) – in a process that recalled Forest's *Tableaux écrans* created in 1967, described in Chapter Two. During the same period, Raysse also worked for a while on video projects at the Service de la Recherche of ORTF, but *Identité* is one of the few video installations he created since being primarily identified as a painter and sculptor. Nonetheless, Raysse was also already identified in the early 1970s as an artist involved with video; he was invited to participate in the seminal exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation 74* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, where he presented his video *Lotel des Folles Fatmas* (1974).

*Identité* comprises of a large wooden surface, about two-meters high, painted black that leans on a wall of the gallery, in the middle of which a generous oval shape – a simplified contour of a oval face – has been cut out. A television monitor is hung on the lower part of this hole and shows a live recording from a video surveillance camera installed on one of the walls adjacent to the wooden form and pointed toward it. When the viewer approaches the piece, his or her image is captured by the camera and transmitted, with a few seconds time delay, to the monitor at the center of the black surface. Viewers face the monitor but see themselves from above and behind, prompting the realization that they are being observed. This contradicts their expectation of seeing in the monitor something unrelated to themselves. Françoise Parfait describes the installation as “a kind of booby-trap, a device waiting for prey in agreement that is nevertheless necessary to also validate the installation”.<sup>58</sup> The viewer is nevertheless fascinated by the work, absorbed into it, hence the title’s reference to a loss of identity and loss of connection with the self, comparable to an out of body experience; the same effect was later achieved in numerous works by Nauman, such as *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970).<sup>59</sup> Indeed, as Raysse stated in his title, participating in the installation resulted in the viewer becoming (a part of) a work of art by him.

Early on, Raysse had attempted to expand his artwork into the physical space of the viewer. In paintings from the early 1960s, for example, he reached this goal with superimposed

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<sup>58</sup> Parfait, *Vidéo: un art contemporain*, 130. My translation.

<sup>59</sup> For further descriptions of immersive and disturbing experiences created by artists using video surveillance cameras in their work, see Stéphanie Katz, *L'écran, de l'icône au virtuel*, 189-95.

cutouts in front of the picture plane, as well as in Pop Art assemblages with the inclusion of three-dimensional everyday objects into the work itself. He also occasionally experimented with large-scale installations or environments, such as *Raysse Beach* (1962), a kitsch reconstruction of the French Riviera, where Raysse grew up. In this installation, the floor of the exhibition room was covered with sand and surrounded with life-size painted pin-ups in bikinis, mounted onto wood panels. On the beach was a range of accessories, such as inflatable beach balls and a ring buoy, in addition to a jukebox playing US beach music of the 1950s and 60s. When originally presented at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in the context of the exhibition *Dylaby* (1962), *Raysse Beach* was conceived as a participatory environment; viewers could enter and interact with the objects. In 1965, aged only 29 years, Raysse returned to Amsterdam for a solo retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum. In *Identité*, the convivial and playful atmosphere of *Raysse Beach* is replaced with a destabilizing experience, in which the viewers lose a sense of where they are and what their role is. During this period Raysse created several video works significant for the history of French Video Art; however, *Identité* is the only work by this artist in the new media collection at the Centre Pompidou.

Beyond developing the Collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne with already existing works, the mission of the Département Nouveaux Médias is also to promote the production of video-based works through commissions, which are eventually added to the collection. The first commission occurred in 1977 and, remarkably, was given to French Fluxus artist Jean Dupuy (born 1925), a painter until 1966. In 1967 he moved to New York, and collaborated throughout the 1970s with Robert Filliou, George Maciunas, and Nam June Paik

and others around the Fluxus group in New York. At this time, he started video recording with video artists' statements and interviews, and organized collective performances. In New York, Dupuy's work became more involved with new media and technology: he worked with installations and machines soliciting the audience's participation, which allowed viewers to visualize what was usually unavailable to them. *Cône pyramide* (1968), for example, is a glass box showing red dust on an electro-acoustic membrane that vibrates with the viewer's heartbeat, while *Ear* (1972) uses optical fibers to allow the viewer to see inside his or her own ear. For the Département Nouveaux Médias commission, Dupuy created a video work in two parts, entitled *Artists Propaganda I* and *II*, which consisted of a series of short sketches by artists and poets active in Paris and in New York (Fig. 65). Based on the model of television commercials, the project invited forty participants to realize an action of their choice, in a limited time, and thus to develop their own publicity in the form of an advertisement promoting their art.

These commissions from the Centre Pompidou continued in the 1980s up to today and were distributed between French and international artists, reinforcing the collection's aim to be an international overview of screen-based art. The major focus of the commissions was an emphasis on video installations, conspicuous in the mid-1980s and impossible to ignore in the 1990s. This orientation towards video installation can be seen in the two catalogues published on the Nouveaux Médias collection.<sup>60</sup> Writing in 1981, Duguet notes that video installation was rarely found in France. Ironically, she locates some of its earliest occurrences in the work of

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<sup>60</sup> Compare Christine Van Assche, ed., *Vidéo et après*, 1992, which focuses on videotapes, and Christine Van Assche, ed., *Collection Nouveaux Médias. Installations*, 2006, which specifically deals with video installation.

Forest.<sup>61</sup> On the occasion of the recent exhibition *Nouveaux Medias* collection at the Centre Pompidou – *Video Vintage* (2012) – were displayed video from 1963-83, including Fluxus, Performance, Art socio-critique with Nil Yalter, and others, and disregarding Forest whose work is not part of the national collections. In his usual manner, Forest wrote an open letter to Christine Van Assche in which he accused her of censoring his work. When they are granted, these commissions often allowed artists to create their first large-scale audio-visual work using new technologies, which they were not able to produce by themselves. Recent examples include video installations by Mona Hatoum’s *Corps étranger* (1994), Chris Marker’s *Immemory* (1999), Pierre Huyghe’s *Third Memory* (2000) and Ugo Rondinone’s multi-screen video installation *Roundelay* (2003).

#### **b. “Art Vidéo”, A New Medium for the Visual Arts**

It is only in the very early 1980s that French scholars, art and film critics show a sustained interest in video, as evidenced by an unprecedented quantity of writings available on the topic. They reveal a diversity of positions and interests in response to the ways in which video practices had developed so far. However, these writings all ultimately come to the same conclusion about Video Art as a new category characterizing a medium-specific use of video. Yet, as we have seen, not all video practices associated with the visual arts were suitable for inclusion in this category, nor collected by the artistic institutions created to house it. The

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<sup>61</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 222.

following discussion therefore revolves around the way in which a consensual definition of Video Art took place in France in the 1980s and 1990s.

Retracing the history of the term Video Art, Grégoire Quenault notes that it was first used in the United States in 1970, when Gene Youngblood mentioned it to describe the work of Nam June Paik, even if the latter usually preferred “Electronic TV” to describe his work.<sup>62</sup> Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema* (1970) is considered the first book to describe video as a form of artistic creation; it includes video, new media, installation and environment art.<sup>63</sup> Quenault explains that the term “Video Art” became popularized in the international press after 1971; prior to this, the terms most commonly used to refer to it were “TV Arts” or simply “video tapes”. In France, the first significant use of the appellation “Art vidéo” occurred in 1974, on the occasion of *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*. Duguet, Bloch and Fargier all agree on ARC’s instrumental role for Video Art; as Bloch summarizes, “It might be said that Video Art in France came into being through the efforts of one institution: ARC”.<sup>64</sup> It must be recalled that Bloch assisted Suzanne Pagé with the organization and the press for the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, she also contributed to the catalogue with a text “La vidéo et les artistes” (“Video and the Artists”).

Anne-Marie Duguet, who provides the most exhaustive account on early video in France in *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing* (1981) dedicates one chapter to Video Art (“L’Art vidéo”), which

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<sup>62</sup> Quenault, “Reconsidération de l’histoire de l’art vidéo,” 33-52.

<sup>63</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970).

<sup>64</sup> Dany Bloch, “La vidéo en France,” in *Rencontres vidéo internationales de Montréal*, ed. René Payant (Montréal: Artexes, 1986), 67. My translation.

she differentiates from the other sections of her book – “Vidéo critique de la télévision”, “La vidéo des femmes”, and “Ecritures sociales et politiques” (“Video Criticizing Television”, “Women’s Video”, and “Social and Political Directions”), in which she focuses on militant video and Art sociologique. According to Duguet, Video Art is more formal and based on aesthetic principles, unlike socio-politically motivated productions, whose poor technical quality and audio-visual crudeness have prevented from being seen as art. Duguet defines Video Art as “Initially [...] an institutional category of recognition that grouped works usually shown in the framework of the museum and of the gallery, or that are created by artists who establish their own affiliation to this field of social activity.”<sup>65</sup> Duguet confirms the tight association that existed between Video Art and the art establishment that promoted it. In France, Video Art as a category emerged directly from the institution, rather than from the artists themselves. Later in her chapter, she argues that in the early 1980s, Video Art in France was represented by only twenty artists, including Dominique Belloir, Patrick Bousquet, Robert Cahen, Catherine Ikam, Michel Jaffrenou, Thierry Kuntzel and Jean-Christophe Averty (who was best known for his work with and on French television).<sup>66</sup> Most of the artists in this list came into the art scene with a background in production, having worked in video research laboratories established within the framework of French television, and were commonly referred to as “artist-engineers”. As mentioned above, Robert Cahen worked at the Service de la Recherche of ORTF in the early 1970s, while Thierry Kuntzel, Dominique Belloir, Patrick Prado and Catherine Ikam all worked

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<sup>65</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 175. My translation.

<sup>66</sup> Duguet developed a significant body of work on the production of Jean-Christophe Averty. See Anne-Marie Duguet, *Jean-Christophe Averty*, 1991.

at INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel), the governmental organization that eventually replaced ORTF. Video historian Dany Bloch also uses the terms “artist-researchers” and “artist-engineers” to describe these artists. Their preferred themes departed from the socio-political concerns mentioned above, as their work addressed notions of time and space, narrative structure, memory, perception, the body and self-observation. Duguet nevertheless includes a brief discussion of Forest under the category of Video Art, along with that of Baladi, Lublin and Yalter, even if their respective works are less self-referential and show more interest in content rather than form.

After being involved in the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation*, Dany Bloch continued working with video and occasionally contributed to the promotion of French video internationally. In 1979, she was in charge of selecting the videos for the exhibition *French Art 1979: an English Selection* at the Serpentine Gallery in London. She presented, among others, works by Dupuy, Gette, Lublin and Pane, which she obtained with the assistance of Alain Sayag at the Centre Pompidou.<sup>67</sup> The works shown were representative of Fluxus, performance and Art socio-critique, yet Bloch summed them up, in the first sentence of her text for the catalogue, as reflecting “the art practices and formal research, linguistic as well as semiological, that defines art today”, therefore equating them with French video production as a whole. In the early 1980s, Bloch made a major contribution to formulating a definition for Video Art in her doctoral dissertation, “Art vidéo, 1965-1980”, which was soon after published as *Art et vidéo, 1960-*

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<sup>67</sup> Dany Bloch, “French Videos Selected and Introduced by Dany Bloch,” in *French Art 1979: an English Selection* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1979), 30.

1980/82. Bloch presents Video Art as “a form of artistic expression using the television screen” that can also “define the production of an artist using television, electronic recording, magnetic tape, and producing images with the entire spectrum of color and form, which are probably rarely used by other medium”.<sup>68</sup> She describes an essentially medium-based and self-referential video practice that takes full advantage of the new possibilities offered by audio-visual technology at that time, such as the introduction of color.

In sum, Bloch writes an international history of Video Art that went on to inspire subsequent publications on the topic. She also set a definition for Video Art in France: one largely based on the dominant US model, and which located the origins of this type of creation in the United States and in Germany in the mid-1960s. As she listed the most significant video artists of her time, Bloch focused on US artists – Acconci, Campus, Graham, Les Levine, Paik, Viola, etc. Quenault criticizes and explains this type of video scholarship:

The problem of the delay of French [video] specialists in comparison to their US or European colleagues is irrelevant. A more determining factor is that, not knowing when the production of video in France exactly began; they too quickly adopted foreign chronologies and even sometimes [foreign] ideologies. A history or rather histories of video art are therefore accepted without having undertaken an analysis of the French situation.<sup>69</sup>

When Bloch does acknowledge video production from France, she points to Fluxus, as well as to the category “artist-engineers” who emanated from television research laboratories at ORTF and INA – therefore to Belloir, Cahen, Ikam, Kuntzel and Prado. Thus – whether it is her list of

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<sup>68</sup> Bloch, *Art et vidéo, 1960-1980/82* (Locarno), 9. My translation.

<sup>69</sup> Quenault, 11. My translation.

artists, the themes that she associated with Video Art (time and space, linguistics, semiology, fiction, performance and the body, installation and environment), or what she defined as its major aesthetic qualities (formal and technical) – Bloch’s definition of Video Art matched the definition adopted by French artistic institutions in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s to validate video art. This same direction had already encouraged most of the choices made during the inaugural exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* (during which she assisted co-curator Suzanne Pagé) and provided a model for video’s subsequent acquisitions in French collections.

Even if Bloch briefly mentions Forest, she was also hesitant to affiliate him with contemporary art and Video Art more specifically.

Forest, for example, represents France in so-called “artistic manifestations” (São Paulo Bienal) but his work does not seem to be a part of this category. He is doing specific work, investigating both communication and people’s lives; he actually labeled it “Art sociologique”. Often there is a misinterpretation of his work because he seems to be known abroad as the first French video artist, and on this specific point, I am somewhat reticent.<sup>70</sup>

Forest’s video production certainly conflicted with the formal definition of Video Art defended by Bloch. Although she is reluctant to associate Art sociologique with any art practice, Bloch does briefly mention a couple of works by Lublin and Yalter. She singles out Yalter’s first video *La femme sans tête ou la danse du ventre*, created in 1974 for the exhibition *Art/Vidéo Confrontation* with video equipment lent to her by the organizers of the show, for special praise (Fig. 66). This video uses linguistics to address ideas relevant to the condition of women, and

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<sup>70</sup> Gerrier, “2x3 mètres à penser les institutions: interview Dany Bloch,” 12. My translation. The mention of Forest’s work appears also in Bloch, *Art et vidéo, 1960-1980/82* (Locarno), 71-2.

was presented by Bloch in the early 1980s as one of the best videos ever created in France. However, this was the limit of her engagement with feminist video and to production focusing on social issues. As a consequence, within the next few years, productions by feminist collectives simply disappeared from the literature on French video. Here, it must be noted that, despite the leading role played by women in the institutionalization and historicization of video in France – Dominique Belloir, Dany Bloch, Christine Van Assche, and to a certain extent Suzanne Pagé – most did not acknowledge the productions of feminist collectives and did not show any solidarity with that cause or even drive toward women’s artists. Instead, ignoring the contribution of women to the early history of video, they favored a “genderless” definition of Video Art that ultimately ended up promoting the work of the white North American males. Speaking in 2006 Ioana Wieder, a member of 1970s militant collective Les Insoumuses, explains that a paradigm shift occurred in France regarding the modes of action adopted by women in the 1970s in comparison with the 1980s. She pointed out that, in the 1980s, there was a significant move towards the professionalization of women’s careers, which marked a different form of struggle and a change of priorities.<sup>71</sup> This direction does not particularly encourage solidarity among women, which had been such a crucial idea for the previous generation.

### **c. Aspects of 1980s French Video Art**

The first stage of development of Video Art, a period that Fargier ironically calls “the Middles Ages of Video Art in France in the 1980s”, was marked by the technology associated

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<sup>71</sup> Ioana Wieder, interview with Yaël Mandelbaum and Julien Marant, *Surpris par la nuit*.

with video that became available in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>72</sup> The U-matic editing system, for example, became available in France in 1979; similarly color video started being used in the late 1970s. In 1986, digital technology was first commercially introduced; it was eventually, used earlier in research video laboratories. In 1981, Duguet explained:

The dominant styles of the first French works were mostly conceptual, socio-critical, and rooted in the problem of communication and representation. These past couple of years the uses of rather sophisticated equipment like the synthesizer, and access to color, encouraged more formal and rhythmic works, focused on visual preoccupations.<sup>73</sup>

The best accounts of the contribution of technology to 1980s French Video Art are the writings of Dominique Belloir, a videographer and video critic. In 1978, Belloir also completed a dissertation in Aesthetics on the topic of video: “Dispositif vidéo, médium créatif” (“Video Apparatus, Creative Medium”), one of the first dissertations completed on the topic of video in France. She turned her dissertation into the book entitled *Vidéo art exploration*, which outlined her views on the role of technology in video production.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Belloir was also active with video since the early 1970s, she developed in the following decade a body of work increasingly marked by the impact of new video technology. She is attentive to developments that chart the passage from analog to a digital technology, and which allowed more creative and formal possibilities. In her essay “La vision machine” (“The Machine Vision”, 1983) she argues that the

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<sup>72</sup> It is the title used by Fargier for a section of his article: Fargier, “Histoire de la vidéo française,” in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, 53-7. My translation.

<sup>73</sup> Duguet, *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 175. My translation.

<sup>74</sup> Dominique Belloir, *Vidéo art exploration* (Paris: Editions de l’Etoile, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1981).

camera, after a phase in which it was conceived as a window on the world, was now free from representational and narrative constraints. For her, the camera is autonomous, like the medium of video itself: for example, she claims that the camera can develop its own vision, independently of the videographer. She advises artists to “explore the camera rather than the world by considering that the machine [...] can create an image far more complex than the simple reproduction of the human vision”.<sup>75</sup> Finally, she recommends a practice that would associate aesthetics and technology, a form of technological aesthetics – an approach that fundamentally departed from the previous decade when the camera was used to record the surrounding world. She describes a type of experimental video practiced by artists, technicians, directors and engineers, which were emblematic of the most developed type of video production in the 1980s; these works were packed with visual effects, superimposed images, the inclusion of text or sound, colorization or color variations, repetition, flickering of the image or of light, zooming in and out, etc.

The two most representative video artists for this new direction were Robert Cahen (born 1945) and Thierry Kuntzel (1948-2007), both of whom focused on an extensive experimentation with the medium using the latest technological innovations and showing a clear interest in the aesthetic quality of their final products. Cahen emerged from *Musique Concrète* and studied electro acoustic composition with Pierre Schaeffer; he also worked at the *Services de la Recherche* of the ORTF, and in the early 1980s, became part of the “Grand Canal” association of videographers, along with Belloir, Fargier and Prado. Kuntzel studied semiology with Roland

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<sup>75</sup> Belloir, “La vision machine,” 257-9. My translation.

Barthes and film theory with Christian Metz. He was Director of the Atelier Critique at the INA, and a respected film theorist whose preferred approaches were psychoanalysis and semiology. During the 1980s, Kuntzel lived in the United States and taught at SUNY, Buffalo.

Cahen's *Juste le temps* ("Just Time", 1983) is a thirteen-minute color video acquired by the Département Nouveaux Médias for the Collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1985 (Fig. 67). The video presents a broken narrative, set in a train carriage, with a seated man and woman. The camera's focus shifts between the occupants of the car, the view from the window, and the corridor of the train. Effects of slow motion, rhythm and fragmentation are omnipresent and obtained through an elaborate editing process, which allowed Cahen to explore visually his recurrent themes of temporality and memory. The video has no dialogue but environmental sounds were added later: train noises, bells and street sounds proposed by the experimental composer Michel Chion, with whom Cahen worked at ORTF. Reinforced by the colorization of the image and other blurring effects used in the video, as well as by the occasional image of the woman asleep, we have the impression of a dream vision, suggesting a fictional and elusive romantic encounter taking place in the train carriage. This partially explains the fragmented narrative, and engages the viewer's imagination. Robert Cahen explained: "My video has a very flexible narration. There is no rigid framework, no scenario, or pre-established dialogue that could guide the understanding of the viewer. Nevertheless, I am expecting a viewer to share the vision, to share the relationship and a comprehension of the world."<sup>76</sup> The work remains open-ended as Cahen does not provide any further information on the characters nor any

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<sup>76</sup> Nicolas Thély, "L'Image dans l'espace. Entretien avec Robert Cahen," *Mouvement* (September 1998), n.p. My translation.

suggestion about what happened before and after what we see on screen. In fact, he leaves his work in an unfinished state, in order to trigger the viewer's reflective process and to create space for his/her imaginative interaction with the work.

Cahen has stated, "I have never pondered the logic of things. What matters to me is considering what this produces in the viewer, what does this bring to a story where there are no words; how can this form a dream, surprise, and maybe develop the embryo of a fiction."<sup>77</sup> This type of work also relies upon the autonomy of the medium, which explains the distance between Cahen's works and those with political concerns. In fact, Cahen explained that he had no political consciousness in the 1970s and that in 1968, during the events of May; he was finishing his military obligations.<sup>78</sup> Cahen's videos have nothing in common with the improvised, immediate and spontaneous character of militant video and Art sociologique, which were often based on informal interviews between the artist and the sitter, and a general disregard for the quality of the final production. Instead, French Video Art in the 1980s was characterized by meticulous planning as well as extensive post-production, editing and integration of visual effects.

Similar characteristics are found in Kuntzel's video practice. One of his most important and representative projects is the three-part series *Nostos* (1979-95). The *Nostos* series was a video triptych developed on the theme of memory. Kuntzel's personal notes, including those on

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<sup>77</sup> Ibidem. My translation.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem.

*Nostos*, show the extent to which the production was based on reflection and theorization.

*Nostos I* (1979) is a 45-minute silent color video conceived by Kuntzel as a “tableau vivant” made of a succession of frozen frames and images (Fig. 68). Kuntzel described it as “a scene that is never fully resolved, that is never seen in its entirety”.<sup>79</sup> Silhouettes of a man sitting in front of a window or of a woman lying down on the floor, are never completely resolved and constantly flickering from positive to negative, changing colors in a succession of nuanced cold tones and monochromatic shifts. The relationships between the different characters and the various scenes are never clear. Kuntzel's inspiration for this piece was based on Freud's writing about the “Mystic Writing Pad” (1925), a children's toy that he saw as an analogy for the psychic process and the way it retain memory in the unconscious.<sup>80</sup> For Kuntzel, this provided a perfect model of video. With *Nostos I*, Kuntzel addressed problems of trace, presence/absence, present/past, as well as time and memory – familiar themes of Barthes' semiology, which was a constant reference for 1980s French Video Art.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Duguet, ed., *Thierry Kuntzel*, 127. My translation.

<sup>80</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Note sur le bloc-notes magique,” in *Huit études sur la mémoire et ses troubles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 129. On the relationship between Freud's concept of the magic writing pad (*Wunderblock*) and his video *Nostos I*, Kuntzel writes: “In 1925, Freud saw in the mystic writing pad an almost exact representation of the psychic apparatus, in that it provided a solution for a then unsolved question of writing: the constant availability of the receptive surface, the permanence of traces in the block of wax. However, two functions were missing: speed – one writing, the other erasing – and the possibility to see vanished traces reappearing. Isn't video the perfect model of which the pad was an approximation? The working title for *Nostos I* remained for a long time *Wunderblock*...” Duguet, ed., *Thierry Kuntzel*, 202. My translation.

<sup>81</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1953); *Mythologies* (Paris, Seuil, 1957); *Éléments de Sémiologie* (Paris, Seuil, 1964).

In working in between images, Kuntzel anticipated ideas formulated in the 1990s by film theorist Raymond Bellour, such as the “entre-image”. This concept reveals the passages and transitions between elements, plans or sequences, in a film production; these ideas were also rooted in semiology, which continued to be popular in the artistic scene in France in the 1980s. From this theoretical framework, Bellour formulated his vision of a “spectateur pensif”, or pensive viewer, broadly inspired by Barthes’ “birth of the reader”.<sup>82</sup> The pensive viewer is the most succinct description of the model of spectatorship envisioned by French video artists of the 1980s. As illustrated by the work of Cahen and Kuntzel, it invites meditation, unconscious processing of the content and contemplation. To some degree, it is also the models of spectatorship proposed by Lyotard in his exhibition *Les Immatériaux*. For Cahen and Kuntzel, the relationship between the viewer and the screen as an interface is more immersive, intellectual and theoretical than that of the previous decade, when video production opted for documentary tactics and guerilla modes of production and dissemination.

As previously suggested, the institutionalization of video in the 1980s, and its accession to museum and gallery spaces, resulted in video evolving toward installation. *Nostris II* (1984), the second segment of Kuntzel’s triptych, was typical of this progression (Fig. 69), in comprising nine television monitors organized in a three by three block, whose proportions referred to a cinema screen.<sup>83</sup> The monitors were connected to VCRs, each showing a different video. Unlike

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<sup>82</sup> Raymond Bellour, “Le spectateur pensif,” in *L’Entre-images*, 77-9. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author (1968),” in *Image, Music, and Text*, 142-8.

<sup>83</sup> For sketches and notes on the different options considered by Kuntzel for the arrangement of screens in the installation see Duguet, ed., *Thierry Kuntzel*, 203-17.

the colorized flickering effects of the first version, *Nostrors II* regressed to black and white; this allowed Kuntzel to create trails of light emitting from the figures and objects, which he obtained by using a rare, miniature, hand-held French camera called “La Paluche” (slang for “the hand”). As with the “Movicolor”, “La Paluche” represented an advance in French video technology.<sup>84</sup> For this work, Kuntzel modified the camera settings to obtain exaggerated visual effects, especially with the trails of light. Duguet compares *Nostrors II* to a “large page where the virtuality of histories are written”, and where “the eye of the viewer is constantly directed to go from one screen to the other, to create an editing process, and to develop his or her own path”.<sup>85</sup> *Nostrors I* and *II* both function as open-ended works, typical of much French Video Art in the 1980s, as there is no clear semantic relationship between the different parts composing the work. Yet not every video artist was so comfortable with developing video installations. Cahen, for example, spoke about the pressure he felt to create video installations in the 1980s, at a time when his work focused on one image on one screen, in the manner of cinema. In fact, Cahen mentions an aborted commission for a video installation from by the Département Nouveaux Médias, in 1984. He could not honor the commission, being too uncomfortable dealing with space and refusing the only other option offered to the artist by the commissioners: to collaborate with another visual artist. Later, in the early 1990s, when Cahen started working on video installations, he noted he had understood how to see and work beyond the image/screen. This

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<sup>84</sup> For more information on this new camera and its use by artists in the 1980s, see Anne-Marie Duguet, “La paluche,” *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, 165-74.

<sup>85</sup> Duguet, “Rémanences, Réminiscences. Thierry Kuntzel *Nostrors II*,” *Collection Nouveaux Médias. Installations*, 183. My translation.

shows how 1980s video artists like Cahen came to installation art specifically from video production, rather than from an interest in space.<sup>86</sup>

Artists working exclusively with video and who self-identified as “video artists” in France were few; instead, there were other artists coming from more traditional media (painting, sculpture, installation) who also addressed the relationship between the viewer and the screen. The best examples of works in this category were developed by “Information, Fiction, Publicité” (“Information, Fiction, Advertisement), an artist’s agency founded in 1984 by Jean-François Brun, Dominique Pascalini and Philippe Thomas. Artists’ agencies were another type of artists’ group, more in tune with the bureaucratic and corporate mood of the 1980s, which succeeded artist’s collectives and associations more typical of the 1970s. They often presented their artistic activities as service to society; IFP explained that this idea of agency was prefigured by the Bureau Surréaliste (founded in 1924), as well as by more recent formations such as General Idea. Philippe Thomas left the group in 1985, but the agency continued its activities until 1994.<sup>87</sup>

One of the first works created by this artist’s agency, known by its brand name IFP, was *Société du spectacle*, 1984, inspired by Guy Debord’s book and film of the same name. The

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<sup>86</sup> Thély, “L’Image dans l’espace,” n.p.

<sup>87</sup> See Jérôme Sans, ed., “IFP Interview with Jérôme Sans,” *Information Fiction Publicité* (London: Barbican Centre, 1988). This book also provides the most exhaustive publication currently available on IFP, which activities are today not widely known, in France, as well as abroad. Recent exhibitions have attempted to fill this gap (even if they were not accompanied with a catalogue): *Information Fiction Publicité, l’épreuve du jour* (MAMCO, Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain, Genève, 2011) and *Information Fiction Publicité. Le théâtre des nuages* (MAC/VAL, Musée d’Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, March to June 2012).

work consists of a light box illuminating a reproduction of famous J. R. Eyerman's photograph, from *LIFE Magazine*, of cinema-goers at the first 3D film ever released (*Bwana Devil*, by Arch Oboler) at the Paramount Theater, in Hollywood, in 1952. Eyerman's photograph had been memorably used as the cover for the first English translation of Debord's book in 1970, and later as the poster for his film of the same name (1973) (Fig. 70).<sup>88</sup> IFP manipulated this same photograph, removing the 3D glasses and showing the audience's bare faces. IFP then created the series *La place des figurants* ("The Extras' Seat", 1987), which is one of their most explicit works addressing spectatorship and the screen. The installation comprises folding chairs hung on a wall of the exhibition room, on which viewers are invited to seat. The first presentation of this work was entitled *Plein feu* ("Full Fire") at Le Consortium, Dijon, in 1987 (Fig. 71). Twenty-one folding seats, hung floor to ceiling on one wall of the gallery, were accompanied by instructions inviting the viewer to sit in rows, like the movie-goers in Eyerman's photograph. Completing the installation were two projectors, one on each side of the seats and facing them, directed toward the viewer-participants of the installation, who were placed under spotlights. Invited on stage to perform a viewing position, the spectators were turned into extras. In the same series, later that year, IFP produced a version entitled *Grande Surface IFP "La place des figurants"* ("Department Store, The Extras' Seat", 1987), which includes a blue or a green monochrome wall painting the size of a projection screen, with the IFP

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<sup>88</sup> Debord's film *La société du spectacle*, 1973, was based on his book originally published in French in 1967 with the same title; its first English translation was *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970). The film was a compilation of various visual materials: recordings of political speeches, TV programs, factory workers, fashion shows, the moon landings, stockbrokers, etc. Some of it also appropriated other creative works that were credited at the beginning of the film, and included a voiceover of Debord reading from his book.

logo on the lower right corner, and a folding seat screwed in next to it (Fig. 72). The blue or green monochrome surface refers to its use in video and television as in the RGB (red, green, blue) spectrum – such as the one in which weather forecasters perform. As for the IFP's logo, it was formed composed of three initials encircled like the copyright sign: ©. While the viewer sits, he/she is seen on the screen, thus simultaneously facing and/or observing the audience.

Moreover, placing the focus on the spectator rather than on the spectacle itself, or he/she becomes the spectacle. To a certain degree, this work recalls Bill Viola's *Reversed Television* (1984), and anticipates Gary Hill's *Viewers* (1996), in that all three works address the role of the screen as interface through which the viewer might be observed, or which can be entered.

Viola's *Reversed Television* a series of forty-four, thirty-second portraits of television viewers show individuals seating in their home, in front of their TV, as if they had been seen or recorded from/by their own television. As for Gary Hill's *Viewers*, the viewer is positioned face to face with a projected video showing line up of life-size individuals, which as an effect raises the question who is looking at whom? Younger artists such as Matthieu Laurette, whose work is described in the following chapter, mentions this installation by IFP, which he saw at Galerie Charles Cartwright in Paris in 1987, as inspirational for his work in the 1990s.<sup>89</sup> Along with Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno, he is also a member of the generation of artists who focuses on the spectator's consciousness.

In the history of French video, the 1980s are marked by the institutionalization of the medium in the visual art that progresses in the form of Video Art, which it has been explained

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<sup>89</sup> Matthieu Laurette, interview with the author, Paris, January 11, 2011.

presents a limited acknowledgement of the potential of video as a practice. With the inclusion of video in the museum's galleries, as well as because of the demand of the institutions welcoming video, in this decade, Video Art increasingly develops spatially as video installation. This anticipates later developments with video-based art in the 1990s, which took advantage of the new technological potential offered by the projected image and witnessed the production of ever more complex video-based projects and installations, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BEYOND THE SPECTACLE: FICTIONALIZED REALITY AND THE SPECTATOR'S CONSCIOUSNESS (1990 to the Present)

This chapter continues my broadly decade by decade history of video art in France by looking at contemporary French artists who are interested in the screen, creating works using television, video and the projected image, some of which are exemplary of large-scale video-based art in the 1990s. It focuses on the artistic production of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Matthieu Laurette and Philippe Parreno, all of whom are interested in models of spectatorship that allow direct and collective modes of participation, and which insist on the viewer's awareness of being a participant in the work.

Scripts, scenarios, narrative structures and fiction are frequently a focus of interest in French Video Art of the 1980s and 1990s. The Second Montbéliard Festival was organized on the theme "Nouvelles Fictions" ("New Fictions") in 1984; Jean-Paul Fargier, who co-organized the festival, commented in the catalogue on the increased presence of narration and fiction in current video, while also describing these works as formal and purely referential to the medium video itself.<sup>1</sup> Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno share a concern for open-ended forms with their precursors discussed in Chapter Three, Robert Cahen and Thierry Kuntzel, yet they are also

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Fargier "De la trame au drame," *2e Manifestation internationale de vidéo de Montbéliard*, 279-81. See also the exhibition *Nouvelles fictions dans la vidéo en France* (Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1985).

worlds apart from them. Along with Laurette, who also came to prominence in the French art scene in the early 1990s, these artists use video and other artistic forms to address the relationship between the viewer and the screen. These works of the 1990s question socio-political models of spectatorship from the 1970s and offer alternative operative modes to them, while also moving on from the more formal and apolitical work of the 1980s. Although this younger generation may have had access to the work of Cahen and Kuntzel through their acquisition in public collections, such as the Musée National d'Art Moderne, none of them consciously identify with this older generation or even mention 1980s Video Art as a point of reference. An unexpected similarity between 1980s video artists and militant and sociological practices of the 1970s, therefore, is that neither establish followers who perpetuate their views and positions in the subsequent decades. Indeed, Cahen and Kuntzel focused on the production process itself, screening manipulated videotape on a television or via projection, which offered a very limited level of engagement with the viewer. These immersive and internal experiences led to a concept of the "pensive viewer" (discussed in Chapter Three), a person intellectually absorbed with the work of art. This concept conflicted with the preferred models of spectatorship and participation in the 1990s, which sought more critical distance in order to shape the spectator's awareness of his or her position as a viewer.

Furthermore, in their emphasis on innovative viewer experience, attained through the exhibition's *mise-en-scène* (an ambition also encouraged and supported by art institutions), an orientation toward video installation, spatialization and spectacularization can be seen in the impressive multi-screen projected images and exhibition-scale installations of Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe, Laurette and Parreno. This aspect of their work has been, the target of

criticism by many – Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Tom McDonough and Jacques Rancière – all of whom expose the paradox that such work, while aiming to advance the viewer’s experience of art, can easily be taken for a fascination with spectacle. This criticism is discussed by Mark Godfrey in his analysis of Huyghe’s work, when he insists that Huyghe does not reject spectacle – as understood by Guy Debord – but embraces and doubles it; therefore: “Huyghe takes the very structure of the spectacle (fiction creating reality) as a format but forges completely new (political) effects with this structure.”<sup>2</sup> Godfrey’s statement can be extended to the work by Gonzalez-Foerster, Laurette and Parreno, in which spectacularization represents an externalization of, rather than an apology for spectacle. The enormous impact of Debord’s concept of spectacle is comparable to the effect of Clement Greenberg’s theory of modernism on US art: Debord’s ideas engendered a similarly dramatic influence on the visual arts in France. However, the artists of the 1990s are not inhibited by Debord’s scathing critique of spectacle; for them, the spectacle is acknowledged as a contemporary reality, rather than the object of fear or guilt. For example, Huyghe explains that,

We must dispel one received idea and that is that the spectacle is a fatalism, inherently alienating. The spectacle is a format, it is a way to do things. ... The point is not as an artist to occupy the position of simply rejecting the spectacle or entertainment as bad: this is a form of escapism. Nor is the point just to incorporate spectacle, and occupy the position of an artist saying, “I will also just be an entertainer.” The point is to take spectacle as a format and to use it if the need presents itself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Godfrey, “Pierre Huyghe’s Double Spectacle,” *Grey Room* 32 (Summer 2008): 38-61.

<sup>3</sup> George Baker, “An Interview with Pierre Huyghe,” *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 104.

For these artists, using spectacle was a necessary critical gesture, as they presented their creations as doubled spectacles within the spectacle of contemporary life. An example of this type of work is Parreno's installation *Marquee* (2008), a multitude of flickering light bulbs installed on a ceiling in direct reference to a theater marquee – an apparatus traditionally used in theater to attract the audience (Fig. 73). Placed at the entrance to a gallery or museum, the work creates an association between these spaces and sites of spectacle.

It is significant that Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno were born in the 1960s (Laurette was born in the early 1970s) and raised with television in their homes, at a time when domestic ownership of televisions increased from 13% in 1960 to 70% in 1970. These artists, like most of their viewers, have since birth been immersed in *televisual* experience, with the viewer positioned as a *télespectateur* (television spectator), a term used in the French language since the 1960s which defines the television audience's viewing experience as separate from other modes of spectatorship that might or might not include a screen. The *télespectateur* would experience, for example, effects such as endless broadcasting, collage or editing occurring through channel-zapping, simulation or reality effects, reality TV, real-time with live broadcasting, or immersion.<sup>4</sup> In many respects, the experiences described above are also common to video, which suggests not only that video was influenced by television but also refers to the less commonly acknowledged influence of independent video production on television.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On televisual viewing experiences, see Todd Gitlin, ed., *Watching Television* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> This is an argument defended by Eric Troncy in his "Manifeste du Réalisme", *Le Monde* (October 13, 2005), n.p.

Certainly, direct references to television frequently occur in both Parreno's and Huyghe's work and also, to some extent, in that of Gonzalez-Foerster, while the entire body of Laurette's work is preoccupied with television. For example, Parreno's series *L'Homme public* (1995) deployed TV and radio personality Yves Lecoq as a performer (discussed below). Huyghe's *Mobile TV* (Villeurbanne, 1995; Dijon, 1997) was a public television project by Huyghe, who invited other artists to participate in a program and submit content. Laurette, for example, was invited to participate in *Mobile TV* with a live program based on his project *Produits Remboursés*, also discussed below.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these references to television, cinema is more frequently mentioned in relation to the work of Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno; the artists often make references to cinema history, terminology and techniques when discussing their work. *Cinéma(s)*, an exhibition curated by Yves Aupetitallot at Le Magasin in Grenoble in 2006, showed three generations of artists inspired by film or video, and especially by the video production of Godard and Miéville in Grenoble in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno were also integral to the 1990s debate on "Cinéma d'exposition", when artists incorporated cinema editing process and time-based considerations, as well as the projected image, in their visual arts productions. However, I argue that Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno make an equal number of references to television, radio and popular culture that are less often noticed and acknowledged

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<sup>6</sup> See Xavier Douroux, "Mobile TV (Canal 48); *Expovision 1997*," in *theanyspacewhatever*, ed. Nancy Spector (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 154-60.

<sup>7</sup> For a review of the exhibition, see Tom McDonough, "City of Cineastes," *Art in America*, no. 8 (September 2006): 61-5.

in the analysis of their work. These references are often less identifiable, because they are less universal and more culturally rooted in a French context and culture.

### 1. Beyond the Spectacle: Matthieu Laurette

Unlike the other three artists discussed in this chapter, Laurette is not directly associated with Bourriaud's concept of Relational Aesthetics. However, Bourriaud included the artist in several exhibitions and mentions him in his later book *Postproduction*. Bourriaud tends to refer to Laurette's work in relation to notions of capital and the global economy.<sup>8</sup> Of this group of artists, Laurette has been the most significantly inspired by the development and democratization of television. Laurette made his first television appearance, which he later termed *Apparition*, on March 16, 1993, and has stated that this event hailed the beginning of his artistic career.<sup>9</sup> Laurette applied to be a contestant on the popular game show *Tournez manège* (Revolving Merry-Go-Round), which aired daily at lunchtime on TF1 (Télévision Française 1) (Fig. 74). *Tournez manège* was a play on words that created the confusion between *manège* (merry-go-round) and *ménage* (household); thus, the game took place in a colorful revolving merry-go-round. The television show aired in France from 1985 to 1993; Laurette's intervention in the show took place in its last year. Similar to US television's *Dating Game* (which ran on ABC from 1965 to 1973), *Tournez manège* was based on the principle of the blind date. Laurette was

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<sup>8</sup> Bourriaud included the artist in several exhibitions and mentions him in his later book *Postproduction*, translated by Jeanine Hermann (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2001), 8, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Jérôme Sans, "GUY DEBORD IS SO COOL! Matthieu Laurette Interview with Jérôme Sans," *Uovo*, no. 11 (June 2006): 54.

still a student at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art in Grenoble when he was selected to participate in the show. Based on his age and social status, the television production team paired him with two other students, one in law and one in business. Laurette and the other male participants posed questions to two women hidden behind a wall in order to determine who would be romantically compatible. Ultimately, Laurette was not picked for a date by either woman, yet a date was not his goal. His ambition was instead to declare himself a “multi-media artist” in front of a national television audience:

This sequence [of the game show] was called ‘Choisissez-moi!’ (Choose Me!). At the beginning of the broadcast, the participants introduced themselves through questions asked by the television’s host [Évelyne Leclerc]. She asked me what I wanted to become later in life and I answered: ‘an artist.’ She went on to ask what medium I worked with... ‘painting, sculpture?’ to which I answered ‘multimedia.’ In a context like that, the word I used was completely enigmatic. It probably had no meaning for the general public. In 1993 this word was exclusively used in the art world and not even yet used in relationship to computers, video games, etc. This episode was my artistic birth certificate!<sup>10</sup>

The artist considered watching television comparable to attending an exhibition opening; in the same way, he felt that a television appearance was a performance, equivalent to a work of art. In order to publicize his “work”, Laurette sent out five hundred invitations to members of the French art community, inviting them to watch his appearance on *Tournez manège*, which is often listed in his biography as his first solo show.

**a. “I am on TV”**

*Tournez manège* was not only Laurette’s first appearance on television; it was also the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

inaugural work in his ongoing series *Apparitions* (“Appearances”), in which the artist is present as a prop, an extra or a participant in various French and international television shows, starting in 1993 (Fig. 75): *La grande famille* (“The Great Family”), on the French cable television Canal+ (1994), *Je passe à la télé* (“I’m on TV”), on France 3 (1996), the *News at 1 PM* and the *News at 8 PM* on France 2 (1997). Unlike Fred Forest’s actions in the 1970s, Laurette’s immediate aspirations were not to bridge the gap between the viewer of television and the connoisseur of contemporary art, nor did he intentionally try to escape the artistic institution or the gallery system. Instead he sought to create a friction based on the misunderstanding between art and television, namely, the inability of the audience – and the television host – to comprehend that the artist’s presence was an artistic gesture, a performance. Later works by Laurette, part of his series *Produits Remboursés* (1996-8), establish the same conclusion. By taking advantage of television’s large viewership, Laurette was also able to reach out to an audience beyond the one already familiar with contemporary art. Explaining his use of media, Laurette stated,

I never decided “Oh yes great, tomorrow let's work with media and TV or legal fields!” They are surrounding us, we are part of it, so it seems clear to me that I have to deal with them. I'm just trying to find the best "spots" to develop activities that often interact with different audiences. I'm trying to "hack" or "hijack" contexts, media, audiences, budgets, etc., to produce disjuncture. Disjunctures often generate their own tools, which one can in turn appropriate and use.<sup>11</sup>

In Laurette’s vocabulary, the notions of “hacking” or “hijacking” television are common, as well as that of “stealing” an audience. In many respects, this evokes Forest’s ideas of infiltrating the

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<sup>11</sup> Cristina Ricupero, “Interview with Jens Haaning, Matthieu Laurette, Aleksandra Mir,” in *Publicness* (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2003), n.p.

media, nonetheless Forest attempts to change the use of the media and always seeks the latest technology, whereas Laurette simply uses them as a reality of his time. Furthermore, Laurette does not try to change its content or create a utopian or creative TV, like Forest, but destabilizes its place within and in relationship to popular and elite culture.

Laurette admits originally using television as a tool for self-promotion with the intention of becoming visible not only in mass media but also in the art world. Laurette draws attention to the fact that in France the status of the artist is highly conventionalized and professionalized. Artists who are not represented by galleries or shown by major art institutions are not considered to be artists. As such, this status excludes a large number of emerging artists and others who cannot fully support themselves by their work. While his first *Apparition* was a gesture of self-proclamation, it was through continued appearances that he hoped to attain credibility. Laurette used television as a means of existential and professional legitimization, validating his status as an artist. As Françoise Parfait explains, Laurette “multiplies his *Apparitions* on television, systematically recording and collecting each example of his participation, as proof of his existence as an artist”.<sup>12</sup> Laurette aimed to merge seamlessly with the television program, more or less playing the role that was expected of him, like other participants in the show. As Laurette likes to recall, any participant in a French television show has to sign the “Droit à l’image” (image permission) contract. All audience members sign this release form, which gives the

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<sup>12</sup> Françoise Parfait, *Vidéo: un art contemporain*, 47. My translation.

television studio the right to include them in the commercially distributed television programs.<sup>13</sup> Anaïs Demir uses rhetoric appropriated from Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* to explain Laurette's work:

Like some human material, as malleable as you like, or alternatively the logo of an unknown company, Matthieu Laurette pokes his nose deep into the interstices of a society of spectacle, endeavoring to flatter the clap-o-meter by extricating humanity from their humdrum anonymity for a limited period of time before dispatching them straight back there.”<sup>14</sup>

Laurette's work *Applause* (*Today Show*, NBC), 2004, perfectly illustrates Demir's observations. The shot is a close-up of a crowd of NBC's viewers, which includes Laurette in the audience (Fig. 76). The image, which was printed as a photograph and on a rug, recalls the J. R. Eyerman photograph used by Debord for the cover of the *Society of the Spectacle*, showing movie-goers seated in a projection room wearing 3D glasses, the same photograph that was used by the artist's agency IFP in the 1980s. In Laurette's photo everyone is laughing in response to the applause sign that dictates the audience's reaction and behavior; they seem to be passive automata of the spectacle. However, the artist appropriates the exposure, production and distribution of television to his own advantage, in order to reproduce and spread his own image. Unlike previous militant video and Art sociologique, which pointed to the risk of losing one's identity through television, Laurette insists that it allows him to build his own image.

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<sup>13</sup> A copy of such a contract, signed by Laurette for his participation in *Français si vous parliez !* (hosted by André Bercoff, in 1993) is reproduced as the back cover of Laurette's *Free Sample Demix* (Paris: Editions Galerie Jousse Seguin, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Anaïs Demir, "Matthieu Laurette," *Documents sur l'art*, no. 11 (Fall 1997): 16. My translation.

More recently Laurette has referred to himself as an artist using “self media”, a term he coined to describe his art of infiltrating television and the media, and the centrality of the artist’s presence in this gesture.<sup>15</sup> It suggests that the artist is both “media made” as well as self-constructed. Ultimately the artist’s multiple appearances on television, and the fact that his exhibitions are filled with documentary materials relating to his *Apparitions*, ensured that his own image is the center of his production. In this way, the artist addresses the temptations of stardomania and narcissism offered by the media (and today by new media) for exposure and self-representation, and which can result in an obsessive need for visibility and representation. Stardomania and narcissism were discussed in Chapters One and Two, in the context of video-portraits by women’s collectives and as an occasional theme in Forest’s work. More recently, the rise of social media has continued to foreground concerns about the continual need for self-representation and media exposure. *Map* is an ongoing work that Laurette began in 1993, it reflects the artist’s obsession for visibility and, like Forest’s work, attests to the artist’s eagerness to record and document all his actions. *Map* consists of a wall-mounted world map on which the artist marks with pins all the locations of *Apparitions*. With this work Laurette visualizes and quantifies his artistic infiltration on a global scale. Laurette’s large-scale installations function as a knowingly egocentric series of self-portraits: images of his *Apparition* performances are taken from magazines and journals and enlarged, shown alongside looped videos of the *Apparitions* as broadcast on television. These installations usually consist of six to nine television monitors

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<sup>15</sup> David S. Rubin, “Matthieu Laurette,” in *New Techno: New Media Installations by Sylvie Blocher, Claude Closky, and Matthieu Laurette* (New Orleans: Contemporary Art Center, 2004), n.p.

presented in a multi-screen arrangement, akin to a video wall. This mode of display also serves to validate his presence on television and ultimately his existence as an artist.

In recent *Apparitions*, however, Laurette is no longer the main focus of his work, and redirects attention to others, such as Guy Debord and Jacques Rancière. These videos show an excited crowd in which the artist is present but visible to the cameras only through a sign that he brandishes overhead. The *Apparition* with Debord took place on the *Today Show*, broadcast on US television's NBC network, on December 31, 2004 (Fig. 77). The critic and curator Jean-Max Colard describes it as follows:

That day in front of Rockefeller Plaza, where the network has an outdoor set and where hundreds of people brandish signs and posters, wave, send personal messages and moan in collective hysteria as soon as the camera get them in a shot, we suddenly see a sweet little pink poster: GUY DEBORD IS SO COOL! A fifty-nine-second appearance, enough time to send a message on television about television, enough time above all to broadcast on-screen an obvious inoffensive critical discourse: reference to Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) had today become the custard pie of media studies, the most worn-out cliché of all discourse on (or against) the media.<sup>16</sup>

In watching this video, acute observation is required, since at a first glance the recording looks like an ordinary morning television show, with nothing out of the ordinary. It is only after scrutinizing the audience in the background, rather than the TV hosts and their illustrious guests in the foreground, and navigating one's eye through an array of signs and hysterical crowd behavior encouraged by the presence of the camera, that one finally notices the artist's discrete intervention. In fact, one needs the looped repetition of the sequence for the incongruity to become obvious; indeed, appropriation and repetition are the two basic formal principles of

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Max Colard, "Matthieu Laurette: Yvon Lambert," *Artforum* 43, no. 10 (Summer 2005): 335.

Laurette's work and exhibitions. Discussing Laurette's choice of Debord, art critic Pascal Beausse notes that "He makes the name of the renowned theorist of the *Society of the Spectacle* appear in the very location of his worst nightmares turned into reality; amongst the 'Go Patriots,' 'I am Gustav' or 'Look here, we want to be on TV!'"<sup>17</sup> Several years later Laurette included Rancière in his work, also during the *Today Show*, on October 30, 2009, via the sign "JACQUES RANCIERE IS SO COOL!" (Fig. 78). The work trades on the inappropriateness of a reference to a philosopher in the context of a popular television show, despite the fact that both thinkers have critiqued modern forms of spectatorship and media alienation in modern society. The names of Debord and Rancière are presented primarily as cultural products of intellectualism, which like popular culture, also suffers from trendiness and uniformity.

### **b. Fictionalized Reality**

As these works indicate, since 2004 Laurette has no longer exclusively used his own appearance in the mass media but instead works with the image of others in a series of performances entitled *Déjà-vu* (2000 onwards), which develop his interest in the effects of cameras, screens, television and the world of the spectacle in general, by focusing attention on celebrities – or more precisely, celebrity lookalikes. The first version of *Déjà-Vu* was held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, during the opening of the exhibition *Au-delà du spectacle* (2000); the last took place in 2005 (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and National Museum, Oslo); it is an

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<sup>17</sup> Pascal Beausse, "Matthieu Laurette," *Flash Art*, no. 38 (May 2005): 152.

ongoing series as the artist does not reject the idea of creating a new performance of this type, but the minimal conditions have not been met. *Déjà-vu* comprises a series of “International Lookalike Conventions” designed for a visual arts audience and held at museums, art foundations, and contemporary art centers around the world. Inevitably, the casting for each convention depends on the culture of the country in which the event takes place. For example, when Laurette organized *Déjà-vu* for the exhibition *Less Ordinary* at Artsonje Center in Seoul, South Korea, in 2002, one of the most popular doubles was a lookalike of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il; it was, understandably, the only time that this particular lookalike appeared in the project. By contrast, Marilyn Monroe has appeared in most versions of the event, while other film and television celebrity lookalikes to have been included are Jennifer Aniston, Sean Connery, Robert de Niro, Eddie Murphy, Conan O’Brien, Rod Stewart, Angelina Jolie, Whoopi Goldberg and Anna Nicole Smith, to name only a few.

*Déjà-vu* is generally scheduled to coincide with the opening of an exhibition; the celebrity lookalikes often appear in groups at the inaugural event, where their role is to generate and revel in a festive atmosphere. They merge into the crowd of art-goers and share their physical space. In some instances viewers had prior knowledge of the project and its concept, but in other cases Laurette’s work remained unannounced until its realization, maximizing the audience’s surprise at being suddenly faced with a number of lookalike celebrities. Laurette notes that some of the lookalikes are celebrities in their own right; they are famous and work with agents and contracts, which impose strict regulations on their working services. He further explains that locating, selecting, and negotiating the contracts with the lookalikes is the biggest

chore of the project, in terms of both time and money.<sup>18</sup> As with real events attended by real celebrities, the *Déjà-vu* performances often quickly turn into photo shoots involving both the audience and the lookalikes – but photo shoots are also arranged by the artist to add to the event’s excitement and spectacular dimension as well as to create a documentary record of it. For the Fall Gala of the Dia Art Foundation in New York, in 2004, for example, memorable moments captured on photographic or video camera show Pierre Huyghe posing with “Whoopi Goldberg” and Lawrence Weiner joking with “Robert de Niro” (Fig. 79). These juxtapositions of exhibition visitors, celebrity lookalikes and well-known artists generates confusion about levels of authenticity while forming a fictionalized reality that confers a surreal atmosphere on the event; it is apt that a double of Salvador Dalí occasionally participated. For his documentation of the *Déjà-Vu* convention at the Castello di Rivoli (2001-2), Laurette encouraged the lookalikes to pose in front of artworks, also on display in the museum. This created incongruous visual associations as well as impossible chronologies (such as Marilyn Monroe posing in front of a Takashi Murakami sculpture), while also recalling previous forms of performance categorized as “Living Sculpture”. The usual separation between the general public and celebrities, the ordinary and the spectacular – a division most commonly materialized physically as well as symbolically in film or television by a screen – was removed in order to create the “extraordinary” in real life. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the viewer-participants of Laurette’s conventions are not the general public but an invited selection of art professionals, plus those who are willing and able to afford a ticket to the Dia Gala.

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<sup>18</sup> Matthieu Laurette, interview with the author, Paris, January 11, 2011.

Obviously, in Laurette’s project the celebrities were only lookalikes, or poor imitations, yet it is precisely this disjunction that gives the *Déjà-vu* series its poignancy. The lookalikes interact enthusiastically with the audience; they are accessible, enjoy the attention, and are actually flattered to be mistaken for those they are impersonating, but they also seem to be locked in a fantasy of aspiring to be somebody else. The fictionalized reality produced by *Déjà-vu* also reminds us that the lookalikes are “real” people, practicing their professional activity, which allows them to live their passion for the person they are impersonating, but continually falling short of becoming them. The video and photographic documentation of these events – which becomes the material of Laurette’s exhibitions – attest to the cheerful but at the same time slightly pained atmosphere created by this incongruous delegated performance.

Laurette’s *Déjà-vu* performances have a precedent in the work of another French artist, Pierre Joseph, who was active in the 1990s and frequently mentioned in Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*. Joseph’s best-known work, *Personnages vivants (à réactiver)* (“Living Characters (To Reactivate)”, hereafter referred to as *Personnages à réactiver*) (1991-6), was a series of performances that he developed in museums and contemporary art centers, first in France and then internationally. (Fig. 80) *Personnages à réactiver* was presented for the first time in the summer of 1991 in the group show *No Man’s Time*, curated by Christian Bernard and Eric Troncy at La Villa Arson in Nice.<sup>19</sup> Joseph hired actors to play characters from legend and popular culture, such as Superman, Cupid, a medieval warrior, a cowboy, an old woman infected

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<sup>19</sup> See Christian Bernard and Eric Troncy, *No Man’s Time* (Nice: Villa Arson, 1991). The most exhaustive publication on Joseph’s *Personnages à réactiver* is: See David Perreau, Eric Troncy, and Nicolas Bourriaud, *Pierre Joseph. Personnages à réactiver/Living Reactivable Characters* (Reims: FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, 1995).

by leprosy, fairies and the like. Others more specifically referenced film or television: the replicant from *Blade Runner* and the three “color thieves”, inspired by the characters in Eastman Kodak’s television commercials and popular in France in the 1980s and early 1990s. Joseph’s work with *Personnages à réactiver* develops in two stages. First there is the performance itself, staged on the opening day of the exhibition, during which the characters occupy the exhibition galleries, acting, posing or interacting with the audience, often aggressively or uninvitingly. The warrior, for instance, charges into the public, while the equally offputting leper in rags wanders silently throughout the exhibition. In the second act, after the formal performance and as part of the group show, the artist exhibits the photographs shot during the opening. Joseph’s work creates a fictionalized reality in the exhibition that is comparable to Laurette’s later presentation of fictional celebrities to a captive audience in the *Déjà-vu* series.

Beyond the fantastic and celebratory dimension of these performances, a political and critical depth has been identified, which addresses the contemporary art world and its tendency toward stardomania and the spectacle. Jean-Max Colard, writing on Laurette’s *Déjà-vu* series, observes that “Beyond playing on the true and the false, Laurette’s ‘performance’ can be seen as an institutional critique, as an investigation of context from the viewpoint of the *mise-en-scène* and *mise-en-abyme* of the social dynamics of the spectacle, and as an examination of relationships between the art world and the celebrity system.”<sup>20</sup> I agree that Laurette reveals and comments on some aspects of the art world, forming its own society of the spectacle with its identifiable habits and social order. However, the political dimension of Laurette’s work is more

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<sup>20</sup> Colard, “Matthieu Laurette,” 335.

visible in projects that incorporate the viewer's participation – and which are ultimately more similar to the Art sociologique of Fred Forest – such as *El Gran Trueque* (2000). *El Gran Trueque* (The Great Exchange), a pilot for a television game show, was broadcast in Bilbao, Spain (copyrighted by Laurette, 2000) and is very similar to Forest's *Télé-choc télé-change*, which aired on French national television in 1975. Based on the BBC television show *Swap Shop* (1976-82), *El Gran Trueque* demonstrated the artist's interest in socioeconomic issues, his quest to usurp the media, and the possibilities of interacting with the viewer. *El Gran Trueque* offered the audience the ability to exchange any merchandise for a “product of the week”, which was selected by the artist. The project started with a Fiat car purchased with the exhibition's budget, and after many transactions, the exchange ended with a set of six blue drinking glasses of very modest value. This game was designed so that the object of the week would always go to the best offer, and the process consistently resulted in the devaluation of the object initially proposed. While Laurette has a different approach to the question of the value of the exchanged objects, his project clearly evokes Forest's *Télé-choc télé-change* (as discussed in chapter Two). Forest's interest was in the personal significance for the audience participant of the objects exchanged; for Laurette, the exchanged objects were considered solely as merchandise with a monetary exchange-value attached to them, and of no personal significance. Laurette has indicated that he was not aware of Forest's project when he created *El Gran Trueque*.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Matthieu Laurette, interview with the author, Paris, January 11, 2011.

### c. Commercial Aesthetics

The projects created by Laurette in the late 1990s increasingly target economic and socio-political concerns. His best-known and most widely shown work, *Produits Remboursés* (Money-Back Products) (1996-98), brought him international recognition; for example, it gained the attention of curator Harald Szeemann, who showed it at the Venice Biennale in 2001.<sup>22</sup> The creation of this body of work correlated to a period in Laurette's life when he decided to take full advantage of everyday marketing strategies and to live exclusively off products that promoted money-back guarantees ("100% Satisfaction or Your Money Back").<sup>23</sup> Laurette started using money-back products because of financial hardship – using coupons allowed him to be reimbursed for his food and most of his other purchased merchandise – and then decided to turn this practice into a work of art. Over a two-year period Laurette advocated his concept of living exclusively on money-back products: he appeared on television, giving tips and encouraging

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<sup>22</sup> Also during the 2001 Venice Biennale, Laurette presented *Citizen Project (Wanted: Financial Support to Acquire Citizenship)*, which prompted more socio-political readings of his work. Originally started in 1996, the project consisted of the artist's attempt to acquire as many nationalities as possible. His point was that the institution of citizenship, when orchestrated by immigration laws, can be marketed as a commodity. After researching the Venice Biennale's history, Laurette offered participation in the exhibition to 112 non-represented countries; in exchange, he requested to be granted citizenship in these respective countries. Three responses were received, but none actually resulted in an offer of citizenship. During the exhibition, Laurette presented copies of these letters at the entrance of the Giardini, as part of what he called the "Other Countries Pavilion". For more information on Laurette's projects at the Venice Biennale, see Pascal Beausse, "Matthieu Laurette," in *La Biennale di Venezia, 49. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte* (Venise: Electa, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Victor Mandon, "Interview Matthieu Laurette. Tout le monde pourrait manger gratis, mais personne n'en profite," *Newlook* 166, no. 4 (July 1997): 4.

others to follow his example. He participated in the France 3 game show *Je passe à la télé* (“I’m on TV”) on May 16, 1996 (Fig. 81) and as David Rubin explains,

He “promoted” his activities [related to money-back products] by appearing on *Je passe à la télé* (*I’m on TV*). The goal of the program is for the contestant to hold the audience’s attention for five minutes by talking about whatever they like. Laurette walked on stage with his shopping card full of “free” products, he was introduced by the host as a sculptor, told the audience how they could get commodities for free and he won the game. As he continued to promote free shopping on television, in newspapers, and on the Internet, he was flooded with invitations for more television appearances, ranging from prime time programs to national news. He finally ended up being dubbed “The Freebie King” by the British *Daily Record*.<sup>24</sup>

As Forest already experienced in the early 1970s with his *Space Media* series, competition between various mass media outlets played favorably into Laurette’s dissemination of the money-back product idea.<sup>25</sup> Laurette appeared widely in the international press, and further increased his visibility by creating his own website. Indeed, in 1996, Laurette created a successful website to promote his interest in money-back products. It provided practical information such as where to find and buy those products and how to complete a successful refund request. The website also provided an updated list of free products then on the market as well as a messaging system allowing users to communicate with one another and exchange ideas and tips about money-back products. Laurette’s website was mentioned in several computer magazines at the time as an innovative initiative and a novel Internet application. It is important

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<sup>24</sup> Rubin, “Matthieu Laurette.” Rubin refers to “The Freebie King,” *Daily Record* (UK), December 8, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Laurette’s money-back project appeared on the front page of the French national daily newspaper *Le Monde* with the headline “Tomorrow, We Eat For Free”; Pascale Krémer, “Demain on mange gratis,” *Le Monde* (May 16, 1997): 1. He was also mentioned in Jack Gee, “The Secret of Free Shopping,” *Daily Express* (UK), (October 22, 1999): 23.

to note that as an artist Laurette was relatively unique in his use of the Internet at this time – 1996 was early in the history of the French Internet and artists at that time rarely used it, with the exception of Forest who created the Web Net Museum in 1991. Today, Laurette’s website appears to be down.

Beginning in 1997, Laurette presented *Produits Remboursés* in the form of large showrooms often displaying a life-size wax sculpture of the artist pushing a cart, which is filled with an accumulation of the money-back items, in addition to various representations of himself in the media, as seen in *Money Back Life*, an installation he presented for the exhibition *Populism* at the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam (2001) (Fig. 82). Occasionally Laurette opted for a more inventive and participatory form of presentation: he organized dinners cooked from reimbursable foods, for instance, or offered guided tours in supermarkets to show audiences (maximum 12) how to find and use money-back products. Finally, during his exhibition *Vivons remboursés* (Let’s Live Reimbursed) at the cultural association Entre-deux in Nantes, Laurette rented a truck – *Le camion-vitrine des produits remboursés* (“The Truck-Window for Money-Back Products”) in 1997 – and drove around the city and suburbs to spread information about money-back products (Fig. 83). The artist promoted his truck intervention in advance with twenty thousand flyers announcing: “Know how to make reimbursed purchases? Methods and practical advice by Matthieu Laurette.” He designed the flyers to look like advertisements, with flashy colors, attractive visuals and slogans such as “Exclusive in your city!”, “All the press is talking about it!”, and so on (Fig. 84).<sup>26</sup> To encourage participation, he often added a free tasting of money-

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<sup>26</sup> The flyer used for the project is reproduced in Laurette’s *Free Sample Demix* (1999).

back foods after his presentation. Laurette subsequently arranged performative and participatory workshops in other cities, including Poitiers and Paris.

As with the *Apparitions*, Laurette's position as an artist is often ignored by the mass media and by his popular audience, although sometimes he is portrayed as a starving artist who found a way to feed himself – a concept that is partly true, if a romantic cliché. He gained a reputation as the person who advocated money-back products in the media, rather than as an artist whose practice is based on media interventions. In *Produits Remboursés*, Laurette focused on the marketing of reimbursable products in order to communicate and motivate the audience to use those products as he did. There is also a socio-political dimension to the series in Laurette's attempt publically to subvert, through legal means, the commercial and economic system. Beausse notes that France was in a recession at the time Laurette developed this work; as a result, the artist developed his own parallel economy in contrast to the market, a micro-utopia in a time of crisis.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Colard explains that Laurette beat marketing at its own game, inventing a parasite economy that encouraged an overidentification with the language of advertising.<sup>28</sup> Bourriaud develops a similar argument in *Postproduction*, finding *Produits Remboursés* to be representative of 1990s work that disrupts economic rules and illustrate the abolition of traditional relationships between production and consumption.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Pascal Beausse, "Matthieu Laurette," *Flash Art International*, no. 23 (November-December 1998): 113.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Max Colard, "Matthieu Laurette: Super discount (1998)," Les Inrocks online, <http://www.lesinrocks.com/actualite/actu-article/t/16650/date/1998-11-04/article/matthieu-laurette-super-discount/> (accessed July 11, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, trans. Hermann, 8.

Not everyone agrees on Laurette's ability to address socio-economic concerns, however. Rancière has been outspoken in his evaluation of Laurette's work, primarily *Produits Remboursés*, and is critical of the modes of presentation chosen by the artist in exhibitions:

Laurette's claim, as one commentator put it, is to have discovered a strategy to overturn both the principle of surplus value and the principle of the TV game show. But it seems to me that the obviousness of this "overturning" of both market and media would not be so apparent were it not already anticipated by the process of monumentalizing his actions and him as icon – had there been a single TV set and standard-size photographs of newspaper clippings of his "bargaining" strategies, the "overturning" might not have been so "self-evident". [...] The more art fills rooms of exhibition with monumentalized reproductions of the object and icons of everyday life and commodity culture, the more it goes into the streets and professes to be engaging in a form of social intervention, and the more anticipates and mimics its own effects. Art thus risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy.<sup>30</sup>

Rancière is addressing here the lack of efficiency behind what I call 'commercial aesthetics', in which the means of consumerist activities are parodied and materialized as an accumulation of goods; for him, this work cannot pretend to support a critique of the capitalist system. I would argue, by contrast, that Laurette's mode of presentation acknowledges the expectations of contemporary museums and art galleries, which pressure artists to produce marketable objects and visual spectacle. Laurette responds to this by targeting some of the art world's taboos against commercialism and consumerism, taboos that the art market nevertheless practices on a daily basis. It should be clear that the public's interest in Laurette's *Produits Remboursés*, and the artist's own interest in the project, resided outside or beyond its presentation to an art audience in

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Paradoxes of Political Art," *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 147-8. This text was originally published as "Les paradoxes de l'art politique," in the French edition of Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (2008), 80-1.

museums and galleries. Rather, he was more interested in reaching a mass audience through television appearances, workshops, guided supermarket tours and mobile trucks. The artist is not denouncing the abuses of consumer society so much as finding ways to subvert it from within; he enjoys the idea that if enough people followed his example, the market economy might possibly fail, destroyed by its own consumer logic.

Laurette's *Produits Remboursés* shares many common interests with Forest's works described in Chapter Three. More contemporarily, Forest has also shown an interest in addressing the economics of the time, by targeting the monopolies of the financial system. An example of this was *The Trader's Ball* (2010) at the LAB Gallery in New York. Christiane Paul points out that in this project traders were avatars in a virtual reality, in what could very well reflect the sources and the form of the current financial crisis.<sup>31</sup> However, in contrast to Forest's goal of extending the audience for art, Laurette does not try to merge the art public with the general public; rather, he separates the two by juxtaposing art and spectacle and by offering each audience a different approach to his work. As a result for the general public Laurette's work is entertainment, and for the art specialist it is another infiltration into the spectacle. Additionally, Laurette creates situations of fictionalized reality that rarely exist in Forest's work. Other artists in the 1990s, such as Huyghe, Parreno and Gonzalez-Foerster, created similar viewing experiences, yet their work more directly addresses spectators' self-awareness of their role within the work.

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<sup>31</sup> "Christiane Paul about Fred Forest", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAMXf0pOsw> (accessed December 26, 2011).

## **2. The Spectator's Consciousness: Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno**

The notions of screen, spectacle and (performative) representation, as well as the viewer's position and self-awareness in the exhibition, are omnipresent in works by Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno. These aspects of their work are rarely discussed by scholars, and as a result have been overlooked, even if these interests are evident in the artists' published conversations and interviews. When the artists started showing their work more frequently in the United States, since 2000, there was a visible misunderstanding between them and their US interviewers. This impression is clear when reading a conversation between Pierre Huyghe and George Baker, in which the artist and the art historian shared very little common ground, and often seem to not understand one another.<sup>32</sup> This can be explained by the fact that all three artists became known within the framework of Relational Aesthetics. Curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined this term in 1995 to establish a better understanding of the social awareness present in certain artworks in the 1990s, above all by French and British artists. However, this concept has been applied too quickly (and possibly too globally) to a vast array of artistic orientations. Among the best known artists mentioned in Bourriaud's book are Liam Gillick, Henry Bond, Douglas Gordon, and Angela Bulloch from the United Kingdom; Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno and Xavier Veilhan from

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<sup>32</sup> Baker, "An Interview with Pierre Huyghe," 80-106.

Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe, and Parreno all have works in the collection of the Département Nouveaux Médias, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

France; Maurizio Cattelan of Italy; Carsten Höller of Belgium; Rirkrit Tiravanija born in Argentina but originally from Thailand and the Cuban-American Jorge Pardo.

Bourriaud summarizes relational art as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”.<sup>33</sup> However, shortly after the book was translated into English in 2002 – around the time that these artists gained international stature through the international dissemination of Bourriaud’s ideas – their lack of socio-political engagement became the target of Anglo-American criticism, which identified it as a weakness in *Relational Aesthetics*. Claire Bishop initiated this criticism in an essay called “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” (2004), in which she criticizes the production of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, in comparison to the more uncompromising work by Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra, and questions the socio-political engagement of Tiravanija and Gillick’s practice.<sup>34</sup> Bourriaud’s ideas brought attention to the artists’ work, but at the same time also framed their reception for

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<sup>33</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Pleasance and Woods (2002), 113. The texts contained in this book were originally published as essays in exhibition catalogues and magazines. Most of them were published in the magazine *Documents sur l’art*, founded in 1992 by Bourriaud, the art critic and curator Eric Troncy, and the artists Philippe Parreno and Liam Gillick. See Bourriaud, “Pour une esthétique relationnelle (Première partie),” *Documents sur l’art*, no. 7 (Spring 1995): 88-99; and “Pour une esthétique relationnelle (Seconde partie),” *Documents sur l’art*, no. 8 (Summer 1995): 40-7.

<sup>34</sup> Claire Bishop in “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79. For the subsequent exchange between Bishop and Gillick, see Liam Gillick, “Contingent Factors. A Response to Claire Bishop’s ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,’” *October*, no. 115 (Winter 2006): 95-106, and Claire Bishop, “Claire Bishop Responds,” *October*, no. 115 (Winter 2006): 107. This debate was instrumental in sparking an international discussion about the concept of “Relational Aesthetics” and the “Social Turn” (Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” *Artforum* XLV, no. 6 (February 2006): 179-85), and the question of how to evaluate artists’ socio-political engagement today.

an English-speaking audience. The socio-political engagement of relational artists is still the subject of debate – no consensus or closure has yet been reached – yet as the discussion continues to unfold, the definition expands to include an even larger diversity of artistic practices. At the Tate Britain symposium “Art and the Social: Exhibitions of Contemporary Art in the 1990s” in April 2010, it became obvious that the relationship between aesthetics and politics applied to art in the 1990s is still open to question, as well as the fact that there are differences between an Anglo-American and a Francophile definition of what constitutes an informed socio-political engagement by artists. From the Anglo-American perspective, a clear socio-political message along with a direct relationship to socio-political concerns, such as targeting a specific cause, constitutes a socio-political engagement; while in France an indirect relationship with a political subject is also fully acceptable and is usually the position that has been preferred since the late 1970s.<sup>35</sup> More recently, the debate has been redirected toward a questioning of what constitutes informed socio-political engagement; artists, curators and critics have interrogated the idea of participation and promoted the idea of ‘useful art’.<sup>36</sup> This chapter

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<sup>35</sup> In this symposium, I presented the paper “A Social Turn in France in the Mid-1990s? Exhibitions that Gave Rise to Relational Aesthetics”, in which I reconstructed the socio-political and institutional contexts in which the work of the artists associated with Relational Aesthetics had emerged in France in the mid-1990s. The main ideas in this presentation are summarized in the current chapter. The symposium is available on Former West website, <http://www.formerwest.org/ResearchSeminars/ArtandtheSocial> (accessed November 26, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> For references to a more recent debate that has overtaken the relational one, see Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Nato Thompson ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2011); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012); and Artur Żmijewski, *Forget Fear* (Berlin: 7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennial of Contemporary Art, 2012).

intends to contribute to these discussions by contextualizing the work of French artists in the 1990s that paved the way for these later debates.

Until recently, the artists associated with Relational Aesthetics constituted a loose “group” or “collective” that met regularly since 1988 for exhibitions, events, commissions and other collective projects. The group consists of approximately forty artists; of the French artists in the group, Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno are the most recognized. The last collective project involving most of these artists was the 2008 exhibition *theanyspacewhatever* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, organized by Nancy Spector, the museum’s chief curator. This exhibition was also the first major presentation in the United States of work by artists associated with Relational Aesthetics. Responding to criticisms about the open-endedness of their practice, Nancy Spector explains: “instead of dictating meaning – a meaning that would resonate, for instance, with a particular constituency – they allow and even promote polyphonic reading of their work.”<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the title of the exhibition, suggested by Gillick, was a reference to Gilles Deleuze’s concept of “Espace quelconque” (“Any Space Whatever”), a rhizome that allows an infinite number of virtual conjunctions and configurations to occur.

In addition to participating in collective exhibitions, the artists continue to develop their artistic practices independently, and often worked in smaller collaborations with as few as two or three participants. Because artists associated with Relational Aesthetics were generally dissatisfied with traditional conditions available to show their work, particularly with conception

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<sup>37</sup> Nancy Spector, “*theanyspacewhatever*: An Exhibition in Ten Parts,” in *theanyspacewhatever*, 21.

of exhibition as a “showroom”, collective projects became a significant part of their activity. In the early 1990s, for example, the notion of the exhibition space as a laboratory for artistic experimentation became popular, both for the artists addressed in this chapter and more generally in the network of French contemporary art associations and centers, which started showing their work in the late 1980s. These artists feel that their exhibition style is itself a mode of expression, a medium; that is, the exhibition is conceived as an essential vehicle integral to their artistic expression. Such curatorial practices intended to contrast to traditional group shows, which are positioned as mere presentations of finished, individual art objects. Starting in the 1990s, a significant number of relational artists became engaged with exhibition making and curating, both of their own shows as well as of other artists, and many of these projects involved viewer participation. The artworks and ideas addressed in this chapter therefore pose a number of questions: what can we learn from knowing the French institutional context in which these artists’ work emerged? What models of spectatorship and social behavior do these artists promote, and are they relevant to the contemporary context? Finally, what kind of socio-political engagement, if any, is present in these works?

#### **a. Socio-Cultural Framework of Emergence**

The institutions attracted to this group of emerging international artists, and to Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno in particular, included contemporary art centers, Maisons de la culture et de la communication, and other art associations, such as FRAC (Fonds régionaux d’art contemporain, “French Regional Contemporary Art Fund”), located in cities outside of Paris.

One could also cite the Maisons de la Culture et de la Communication of Chalon-sur-Saône and of Nevers, where Bourriaud and Troncy started working together on exhibition and publication projects in the 1980s, and the Apac (Association pour l'art contemporain, "Association of Contemporary Art"), founded in 1983 in Nevers by Yves Aupetitallot. These institutions offering early support to these artists were significant for their participation in a program of cultural decentralization and democratization initiated by cultural affairs minister André Malraux in the early 1960s, and some had been pioneers for showing contemporary art outside Paris in the late 1970s. The CAPC Bordeaux (Centre d'arts plastiques contemporain, "Center for Contemporary Visual Arts", later Museum for Contemporary Art), for example, presented *Traffic* (Fig. 85) in spring 1996, Bourriaud's seminal exhibition of relational art; together with Le Consortium in Dijon, it was one of the oldest institutions outside of Paris for showing contemporary art in France. Many early solo and group shows by relational artists took place at these two venues.<sup>38</sup> Both institutions were created in the 1970s and prefigured, by almost a decade, the renewed decentralization program, in the 1980s, by Socialist government, through the dynamism of Jack Lang as minister of culture. Le Magasin in Grenoble and La Villa Arson in Nice evolved from this development in cultural politics as well as from government support:<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Traffic* (Bordeaux: CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, 1996). On the history of Le Consortium, see Xavier Douroux, Franck Gautherot, and Eric Troncy, *Compilation: Une expérience de l'exposition* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998). This catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Dijon/Le Consortium.coll.*, a presentation of Le Consortium's collection at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1998, and compiles twenty years of exhibition history at this institution, from 1978 to 1998. There is no comparable retrospective publication for the CAPC in Bordeaux.

<sup>39</sup> See Yves Aupetitallot, ed., *Le Magasin 1986-2006: Catalogue des 20 ans du Magasin* (Grenoble: Le Magasin, 2006). To date there is no equivalent publication for La Villa Arson.

each was established in 1986 as a National Center for Contemporary Art, as a result of Mitterrand's *Grands Projets*.<sup>40</sup> The FRACs were established in 1982 in each of the twenty-seven regions in mainland France and in its oversea French territories, and further supported cultural decentralization. The goal of all these institutions was to support artists, present exhibitions, and establish collections of contemporary art outside of Paris – the traditional center of French culture – thereby promoting local, national and international art production.<sup>41</sup>

It was in the context of this alternative network of institutions that emerged within progressive Socialist policies promoting cultural democratization, that Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno began showing their work in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In these institutions they found the flexible conditions that allowed them to develop their art and exhibition making, going beyond traditional conceptions of the gallery as a showroom of art objects, to offer an experiential process involving various levels of conviviality, interaction and participation for the artist and the viewer alike. However, because these artists resisted traditional artistic practices of representation and documentation, and defended the idea of art as a situation, they tended to produce an “object” that was often barely visible or accessible to the viewer, and which frequently did not communicate well beyond the experience of the exhibition itself. This

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<sup>40</sup> Mitterrand's *Grands Projets* also included the Institut du Monde Arabe (1987), Parc de la Villette (1987), the Louvre Pyramid (1989), the Grande Arche de La Défense (1989), the Opéra Bastille (1989), and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (1996), all located in Paris.

<sup>41</sup> For information on the original project and the history of the FRACs, see Philippe Urfalino and Catherine Vilkas, *Fonds Régionaux d'Art Contemporain: La délégation du jugement esthétique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

emphasis on relations, rather than on materiality, is a characteristic they share with Lyotard's project *Les immatériaux* (1985), described in Chapter Three.

One example of this type of exhibition is *Moral Maze*, conceived and curated by Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno in 1995 at Le Consortium in Dijon; the title is a reference to the long-running BBC radio show that debates moral dilemmas behind the week's news stories. During the week preceding the opening, the project *Moral Maze* took place in the exhibition space. It consisted of a series of interviews conducted by the artists, acting as "investigators" whose role was to interrogate a selection of specialists representing various fields of socio-professional activities. The interviews were partially recorded in an "intermediary report" written by Liam Gillick for Angela Bulloch alone, who was absent at the beginning of the interviews, and were not intended to be documented through writing or any audio-visual recordings.<sup>42</sup> With the exception of Gillick's report, today almost no information remains to reconstruct what happened in the week before the exhibition opened. According to Gillick and Parreno, the interviews were intended to be non-judgmental; more precisely, they were described as transversal investigations permitting an examination of the physical and subjective structures of contemporary society, the formation of ideas, and the role of the artist. *Moral Maze* showed almost no works of art, and as Gillick recalls, when works were created they happened out of boredom on the artists' part, since no artistic productions were expected to result from the project. For instance, Parreno covered the glass entrance door of the exhibition space with white paint, while another artist reacted to it by scratching letters on the door that spelled out the words

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<sup>42</sup> It was later published without Gillick's authorization in Douroux et al, *Compilation*, 564-6.

“Philippe Idiot” (Fig. 86). Indeed, the door created a setting that suggested that the whole exhibition was still being installed or was simply closed, when in fact it was open to the public. Parreno’s proposition was provocative and resisted visibility; it was nevertheless enticing, as the door to the exhibition was always slightly ajar, inviting the more daring visitors to enter. Inside, viewers encountered a near empty space that showed evidence of having been recently occupied, giving them the impression of having arrived too late or too early. Rather than presenting artworks, as expected, the exhibition comprised various pieces of furniture and other objects taken from the institution, borrowed from other venues or simply found or brought along by the artists to create a waiting room: a table, chairs, a stack of magazines, carpets, as well as too many light appliances, into which Gonzalez-Foerster had placed light bulbs of higher intensity than required (Fig. 87). Overall, the installation suggested a living space or, perhaps more appropriately, a workspace or an artist’s studio. A project like *Moral Maze* undeniably experimented with the limits of exhibition making and spectatorship by giving the viewer very little to see and limited information by which to understand the exhibition’s goal. It resulted in a spatial equivalent of a moral maze, collectively created by the artists, who wanted to explore whether or not it was possible for others to visit such a place. Counter to the popular misconception of relational art, the experience offered to the viewer here was far from convivial or affirmative. The only approachable aspect of the exhibition was arguably a bed – a “rest corner” by Tiravanija – for the use of artists and viewers (Fig. 88).

In questioning the audience’s expectations of what usually constitutes an exhibition, the artists also departed from models of exhibition and art making that consist primarily in delivering a coherent theme or message. On this basis, along with the fact that they only seemed to speak to

contemporary art insiders, the artists have been blamed in the Anglophone literature for the open-endedness of their work, for their lack of a clear critical target, and for addressing just a selective and privileged audience. However, this criticism did not occur in French popular cultural magazines known for their left-wing orientation, which were widely read in France in the 1990s, and in which the work of Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno was first discussed. Indeed, early in their careers, Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe, Laurette and Parreno received significant support from French cultural magazines such as *Les Inrockuptibles* and *Chronic'art*, as well as from the fashion magazine *Purple*, created by French curator and critic Olivier Zahm. Dedicated to culture at large, these magazines rarely included a regular art section, but were extremely popular among those interested in contemporary art. As pointed out by Tio Bellido, the goal of these art magazines is no longer to analyse art but to communicate on cultural events and spectacle, including the visual arts.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, the popularity of the international contemporary art journal *Art Press* (founded in 1972 by Catherine Millet) was gradually declining. In contrast to the straightforward journalistic style used in cultural magazines like *Les Inrocks*, *Art Press* published theoretical writing informed by poststructuralism, which was intellectually challenging to a readership interested in contemporary art but not necessarily in art theory. Even if this context of reception cannot prove the artists' socio-political interests, when considered alongside the fact that their work was shown throughout France in an alternative network of contemporary art institutions, it might help us to understand why Gonzalez-Foerster,

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<sup>43</sup> Ramon Tio Bellido, "The Epistemological Shift from Postmodernism to Globalization, or How to Name Art Today: Reflections on French Magazines since the 1970s" (paper presented at the Rewald Seminars, New York, CUNY Graduate Center, September 4, 2012).

Huyghe and Parreno were recognized by their peers, as well as by the French audience, as more socio-politically engaged than their predecessors from the 1980s.

This network of left-oriented cultural institutions and independent media also chimed in other ways with the views of the artists discussed in this chapter. Before receiving support from the socialist government throughout the 1980s, many of the institutions mentioned above had already established their activities independently in the late 1970s under the legal status of “Association by Law 1901”. (For example, Le Consortium was so-named in reference to its original formation as a group of independent cultural associations.) These associations resulted from a liberal law, adopted on July 1, 1901 under the Third Republic, which authorized “freedom of association” and promoted the formation of groups of independent individuals who collaborated toward the realization of a common goal. Viewed under this law, associations are broad in their concerns, from sport and arts to humanitarian and social activities. Since the late 1970s, associations spread throughout France, especially in the field of culture (by 2006 there were approximately one million). Art associations were central to the expansion of the contemporary art world in the 1970s and 1980s, and created the basis for an innovative network of contemporary art centers. The status of association by Law of 1901 also allows access to government grants for operational expenses. In the 1980s, associations for contemporary art began receiving financial support from the French government through the Ministry of Culture and its regional delegations, Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles (DRAC). Funding was decided annually and as a result was also equated with competing against a network of similar organizations to share the same limited budget. Still in place today, this system ultimately creates rivalry between institutions and tends to limit the dynamism of the field of contemporary art in

France. Indeed, it restricts collaborations between cultural organizations of the same nature and resists the emergence of new cultural initiatives, which are seen as a threat to the survival of individual organizations.

Because the association model was familiar to the artists discussed in this chapter, they created the *Association des temps libérés* (“Association of Freed Times”) on June 2, 1995. Huyghe was its president, Xavier Veilhan – a French sculptor and installation artist, active since the 1990s – its vice-president, Gonzalez-Foerster its secretary, and Parreno its treasurer. The association originated as a proposition by Huyghe for the exhibition *Moral Maze*; the other participants in the exhibition – Gillick, Angela Bulloch, Maurizio Cattelan and Douglas Gordon – were listed as “honorary members”. As specified in its status, Honorary Members had accomplished services for the association and were released from paying the 10 francs annual fee. Other members could join the association upon request to the bureau and payment of the fee. These participants would be benefactors and active members of the association. According to its mission statement, the association was created to promote the work of the artists and “to make its ideas known” via “public meetings, conferences, publications and parties”. More significantly, it called “for the development of unproductive time, for free thinking and the development of a society without work”, ideas that underline some of the artists’ more liberal and anti-capitalist views. These statements by the association were similar to those of late-nineteenth-century Franco-Cuban political writer Paul Lafargue, often referenced by Huyghe and Gillick, as outlined in his “Droit à la paresse” (“Right to Be Lazy”), a defense of leisure time and creativity

as paths toward human progress, rather than the supremacy of work.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, the *Association des temps libérés* was a collective art project presented in the *Moral Maze* and in the exhibition's main gallery – the investigation room – where its declaration, its status and a copy of its publication in the *Journal Officiel* (the Official Journal of the French Republic) were left on a table designed by Gillick (Fig. 89). Indeed, to fulfill legal requirements, ten days after being established, the *Association des temps libérés* was made official by being declared to the police department. This declaration allows the publication of the association at the *Journal Officiel*, issued daily to inform the public about legal events and publications, and official declarations. In addition, a blank sheet of paper was provided in the exhibition, on which viewers who wanted to join the association as active members could identify themselves and submit a proposal.<sup>45</sup>

## **b. Altered Performances**

Beyond their collaborative projects, individual works by Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno demonstrate the artists' socio-political engagement by establishing a new relationship between the viewer and the screen. I argue that the primary contribution of these artists is a concept of spectatorship that addresses the viewer's awareness of his or her own presence before the work. This can be found most clearly in recent works by Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno that develop the form of what I call "altered performances". The term suggests a

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Lafargue, *Le Droit à la paresse* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1969).

<sup>45</sup> For more information on the association, see Hans Ulrich Obrist, "L'association des temps libérés: A to Z (Pars Pro Toto)," in *theanyspacewhatever*, 149-53.

departure from traditional artistic performances by moving the focus from the performer's presence onto that of the viewers, their place and role, often as extras or bit players in the work or in the exhibition as a whole. Works by Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno thus inquire: What does it mean to be a viewer of artistic performances and representations?

A typical example is Huyghe's *A Journey that Wasn't* (2005), a two-part project comprising a voyage to Antarctica and a concert performance in New York's Central Park. It resulted in an almost thirty-minute single-channel video, commissioned jointly by the New York Public Art Fund and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and first exhibited during the 2006 Whitney Biennial. The film, however, gives only a very modest and fragmentary idea of the overall project, which began in February 2005, "when Huyghe and six other artists, along with a 10-person crew, set sail on a polar research vessel from Argentina for a month-long tour of Antarctica".<sup>46</sup> Their objective was to find and explore a new land – now accessible due to global warming and the melting of the polar ice cap – and possibly to discover new animal species revealed through this change in climate. The project was based on a loose script (an expedition to Antarctica) and developed as a documentary record of the journey; the scenario was written as the trip proceeded. The crew ultimately found an uncharted island that Huyghe registered as "Oci Occidad", a name that will appear on future maps of Antarctica, and encountered an albino penguin, which was filmed and then integrated into the narrative of the expedition as a possible new species (Fig. 90). A second stage of the project was developed and announced as "A Central Park Musical", which turned out to be a live concert performance by a symphony orchestra,

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<sup>46</sup> Nancy Princenthal, "Reasons to be Happy: Huyghe's 'Celebration Park,'" *Art in America*, no. 8 (September 2006): 127.

complete with a light show and an animatronic penguin (Fig. 91). The overall impact of the production was an elusive and intentionally open-ended narrative about a journey, whose title – *A Journey that Wasn't* – suggests both an imaginary expedition and an artistic spectacle.

The score by Joshua Cody, directed by Elliot Sharp, was created by converting into music the data collected from the topography of Antarctica. The motivation for the concert was in fact to record a section of the video in which the audience was visible, and in order to get sufficient takes for the movie the same concert was played three times in front of the same audience. As further described by Princenthal,

... the weather was uncooperative, with heavy rain and humidity turning the nighttime scene into a mist-shrouded, darkly ruddy Wagnerian *Schwarzwald*. In flashes, as bright light blinked on and off, the video shows the orchestra at work, a distinctly pagan-looking business of blowing horns and scraping bows, while ranks of dedicated viewers brave the downpour in identical clear plastic ponchos, appearing both urbane and druidical. Beyond, the lights of grand old buildings surrounding the park and of newer skyscrapers looming among them are tearily rain-dimmed and blurred; from the camera's vantage point, the park seems to serve as the city's biological engine room. Standing on a rocky outcropping amid this smoldering landscape, a lone penguin raises and lowers its wings.<sup>47</sup>

The final video alternates sequences of the Antarctica trip (complete with albino penguin) and footage from the concert showing the audience attending the performance, against the backdrop of a rainy Manhattan. Huyghe's decision to foreground the audience evokes Bourriaud's idea of a "société des figurants" (society of extras), described in *Relational Aesthetics*:

The society of the spectacle has been defined by Guy Debord as the historical moment when merchandise achieved "the total occupation of social life", capital having reached "such a degree of accumulation" that it was turned into imagery. Today we are in the further stage of spectacular development: the individual has shifted from a passive and purely repetitive status to the minimum activity dictated to him by market forces. So television consumption is shrinking in favor of video games; thus, the spectacular

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<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

hierarchy encourages “empty nomads”, i.e. programless models and politicians; thus everyone sees themselves summoned to be famous for fifteen minutes, using a TV game, street poll, or news item as go-between. This is the reign of “Infamous Man”, whom Michel Foucault defined as the anonymous and “ordinary” individual suddenly put in the glare of the media spotlight. Here we are summoned to turn into *extras* of the spectacle, having been regarded as its consumers.<sup>48</sup>

Bourriaud defines the “society of extras” as a development from Debord’s concept of society of the spectacle. It formulates the awareness that the viewers form a society in itself – a society of extras –, and that they can benefit from the critical understanding of their role not only as spectator but as also as participant in the spectacle.

Gonzalez-Foerster has recently proposed two examples of altered performances for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, both of which involved the viewer’s participation within specific set of protocols established by the artist. *T. 1912* that built upon Gonzalez-Foerster’s previous performance at the Guggenheim, *NY 2022* (2008), a concert-performance based on the movie *Soylent Green* (1973, dir. Richard Fleischer), itself based on a book *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), by Harry Harrison. Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno frequently to take a movie, literary work or other narrative as the starting point for their projects. *T. 1912* was commissioned by the museum and realized in April 2011, and comprised a live concert performed on the rotunda floor of the museum, watched by the audience from various levels of the museum’s ramps. (Fig. 92) The concert involved just one composition, Gavin Byars’ *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969), an indeterminate work that allows the performers to select sound sources to play from, in a temporality also defined by the musicians.

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<sup>48</sup> Bourriaud, “Glossary: Society of the Extras,” *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Pleasance and Woods (2002), 117.

*T. 1912* was inspired by accounts of the Titanic's band continuing playing until the ship sank; Byars's composition attempted to reconstruct sounds from the event, as described in survivors' first hand accounts. Prior to the concert, as the audience waited in the museum auditorium, announcements were made that boarding was eminent. Actors dressed as crewmembers gathered the audience in small groups, often organized by gender, and brought them through the museum's "staff only" hallways to the ramps at the entrance of the exhibition space. Each ramp was labeled with a letter – A, B, C, and so on – according to the Titanic's deck plans, which originally separated passengers based on social class. A key moment in the performance, just before one entered the museum space proper, was the meeting with the "captain" of the ship – an older actor dressed as a high-ranking crewmember who stood at a podium next to the entrance, greeting the participants with a large smile and a "Welcome Aboard!"

When the entire audience had entered the museum, the music started playing. Inevitably the pristine white walls, as well as the streamlined design of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, were instrumental in suggesting that the viewer was on the Titanic rather than at the Guggenheim. The circular design of the rotunda recalled the grand staircase of the famous cruise ship, while life preservers hung from the museum's balconies, and deckchairs were available on the top floor of the galleries. The aim was to create a distortion in the notion of time and space, and to invite the viewer to enter a representation of the sinking Titanic. The architecture of the Guggenheim allowed viewers to see one another across the atrium, and to watch each other as extras in the event. Gonzalez-Foerster seemed to take advantage of and realize Frank Lloyd

Wright's original aim to create a community of viewers.<sup>49</sup> This set-up underlined the fact that each participant is simultaneously a viewer and viewed. Gonzalez-Foerster's performance seems to build upon Huyghe's *Opening*, an altered performance he realized during *theanyspacewhatever* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, on October 24, 2008; the museum's lighting was switched off, leaving viewers to circulate wearing lamps attached to their heads. This resulted, in fact, in viewers looking at each other across the rotunda (Fig. 93).

Other examples of altered performances, which foreground the viewer's physical presence during an event, are not limited to recent productions by these artists; similar ideas were already present in some of their work in the early 1990s, such as Parreno's performance for the group show *Surface de Réparation 2* (1994), at the FRAC Bourgogne in Dijon, the second act of a group show held in two parts, curated by Eric Troncy. The exhibition's conceit was to consider the artists as teammates and the exhibition space as their playground: the artists would develop works collectively, either from encounters before the opening or as a reaction to or in dialogue with works already submitted by other artists. The exhibition presented works by Gillick, Huyghe, Parreno, and Veilhan, among others. Parreno invited the famous impersonator Yves Lecoq to participate in a performance for the opening night of the exhibition. (Fig. 94) The performance, *L'homme public* ("The Public Man"), was a reading by Lecoq about Sangoku, a character from the Japanese manga *Dragon Ball*, using the voices of the politician Jacques Chirac, the French rock singer Johnny Halliday, and the US actor Sylvester Stallone (or at least,

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<sup>49</sup> See Frank Lloyd Wright original design sketch for the Guggenheim, which shows the audience looking at one another across the balconies: *Reception*, 1949-53, graphite pencil and colored pencil on paper, 29 1/8 x 38 3/4 inches (FLLW FDN #4305.092).

his French dubbed version). Because the reading was based on an unattributed text and was centered primarily on appropriated voices, the point was to question authorship. Actually, Parreno's use of surrogate voices builds on many other works he has developed using appropriated celebrity voices, as in *La pierre qui parle* ("The Speaking Stone", 1994), which used the voice of Jean-Luc Godard. For *theanyspacewhatever* exhibition, he produced an audio guide containing a recording by Boris Konrad, a three-times North German World Memory champion, acting as a narrator for the exhibition, and who attempted to recite the exhibition guide and artists biographies from memory, and to break a world record in doing so (*Audio guide*, 2008).

In *Surface de Réparation 2*, needless to say also that the overt pop culture references in the subject matter and the substance of the performance, as well as the juvenile and almost unintelligible text recited by the performer were provocative as an anti-performance for the cultural institution housing it as well as for its viewership. According to Parreno, however, the core of the project was the movement of the audience toward the performer, an action prompted by the artist through his deliberate use of fake audio equipment and an unplugged microphone, which ensured that the audience would have difficulty hearing the reading. In other respects, Parreno's *L'homme public* was prefigured by Forest's *J'expose Madame Soleil en chair et en os* (1975), discussed in Chapter Two, since both presented to French media celebrities in the flesh, but the work has more in common with Laurette's *Déjà-Vu* in that, as with the lookalikes, Lecoq gained his fame from his ability to copy celebrities – to imitate their voices –, thus he was somewhat also pitiful and, in fact, already out of fashion when he participated in the

performance. This reference to the “just-past” of 1980s pop culture is something that Parreno often integrates into his work.

The collective work by Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno, created for their three-person show at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1998, addresses spectatorship and the screen even more explicitly.<sup>50</sup> *Narrateur* (“Narrator”, 1998) is made up of a series of short videos of a young woman who narrates the exhibition in the style of a *speakerine* – the French equivalent of the English “talking head” (Fig. 95). When the piece was realized in 1998, “talking heads” had already disappeared from French television. The last ones were seen on TF1 and Antenne 2 in January 1992, and their last appearance on France 3 was in 1993. *Speakerines* on French television were always women, and used to be the first person one would see on television in the morning and the last person at night (in the days when TV still stopped broadcasting at night). *Speakerines* were friendly familiar faces of the “small screen” who, as narrators of television, would regularly appear to introduce and announce programs and say “goodnight” to the television audience. These videos by Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno composing the “Narrator” were presented on small LCD screens located throughout the exhibition. Through her continued narration, the *speakerine* gradually became a familiar presence in the show, guiding viewers through the works via her screen image. This design also recalls works by Forest (described in Chapter Two) in which the image on the screen became a replacement for human presence itself. But the best example of this substitution is Huyghe and Parreno’s project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002) in which the two artists bought an available

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<sup>50</sup> *Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno* (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne, 1998).

and empty character, Annlee, from a Japanese manga agency and then lent it to other artists. A total of eighteen artists participated in the project, including Gonzalez-Foerster, Gillick, Joseph, Tiravanija, Richard Philips and Joe Scanlan. The goal was to collectively build a character, a personality, and a life for Annlee. When the artistic project ended in 2002, Annlee was symbolically freed from her condition as representation. In the three-man exhibition at ARC, the narrator suggested ways for viewers to interact with the exhibition: at one point, she silently browsed a magazine, indicating that viewers should do the same with actual magazines available nearby. In so doing, the viewer encountered another collective project by Huyghe and Parreno, *Anna Sanders: L'histoire d'un sentiment* (“Anna Sanders: The Story of a Sentiment”), in the form of a magazine self-published by the artists in 1996 (Fig. 96). Anna Sanders was introduced by the artists as the first (fictional) character presented in “a magazine of a character”, self-published and copyrighted by Huyghe and Parreno in 1996 (only one issue has been published so far).<sup>51</sup> The narrator presented the exhibition to the audience and created “an exhibition within the exhibition” – inspired by the idea of a “film within a film” – which created a sense of distance and layering, while also granting the viewer an increased awareness of their own position as audience.

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<sup>51</sup> Huyghe and Parreno, *Anna Sanders: L'histoire d'un sentiment* (Paris: Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, 1997). Anna Sanders then became the name used for the movie production company founded by Huyghe and Charles de Meaux in 1997. Anna Sanders has produced films by visual artists and filmmakers Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe, de Meaux, Parreno and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, among others.

### c. Making-of Effects

Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno are critical of the possibility of the total immersion in the spectacle or in the screen, the model of spectatorship preferred by French video artists in the 1980s. As a result, their work frequently includes effects from the making of the work – the “film about the film” – showing behind-the-scenes content or viewers as well as recording crews and cameras. Huyghe’s *Blanche Neige Lucie* (1997) is such a work, a four-minute single-channel video in which Lucie Dolène – who dubbed into French the voice of Snow White in the eponymous Disney movie – tells the story of a court case regarding the ownership of her voice. She appears facing the camera in front of a film set under construction, as she sings the breezy main theme of the movie with the same fresh voice that she had 35 years earlier. (Fig. 97) Through the subtitles, she recounts how she first saw *Snow White* in 1938, when the film was released in France, and her later meeting with Walt Disney, who cast her voice for the French version in 1962:

When I gave my voice to that character, that lovely little princess so elegant and innocent, I was Snow White, yes, totally! I have a strange feeling, it is my voice and yet it no longer seems to belong to me. It is part of the character, and the story... But it is my voice all the same. I got deeply involved in a court case to protect my rights for the use of my voice.<sup>52</sup>

The video ends with the subtitles turning to italics, explaining that Dolène won her court case and was returned the ownership of her voice in November 1996. Through this short case study, Huyghe addresses questions of identity and loss, and the relationship between spectacle and reality, within the framework of the mediated image. According to McDonough, this video

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<sup>52</sup> Transcription of Huyghe’s *Blanche Neige Lucie* is published, in French and English, in *Documents sur l’art*, no. 11 (Fall 1997): 114.

functions as counterspectacle by presenting a pessimistic analysis of the entertainment industry's total control over its subjects.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, Huyghe developed strategies with similar effects in *The Third Memory* (1999), an installation and two-channel projection. Based on the movie *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), directed by Sidney Lumet, it reconstructs a bank robbery that took place in Brooklyn, New York, in 1972. This is not an isolated example by Huyghe referencing seminal movies: one of his earliest works using video was *Remake* (1995), a reenactment of *Rear Window* (1954) by Alfred Hitchcock. For *The Third Memory* Huyghe asked the actual thief, John Wojtowicz (played by Al Pacino in the movie), to reenact from memory, twenty-eight years later, some of the key moments of the robbery. The production was recorded in Paris, using a reconstructed bank similar in style to the original in Brooklyn. Huyghe's video opens with his protagonist explaining, "My name is John Wojtowicz, and I am the real Sonny Wortzik, and I am the one that you see in *Dog Day Afternoon*." Already the video confuses real identity with its cinematic reconstruction. While narrating his story, Wojtowicz is also shown acting and directing the extras; in the final video, we also see the cameras, camera operators and crew members (Fig. 98). Including cameras, camera operators, and crew members in the frame was an alienation effect frequently used by Jean-Luc Godard, as for example in *Le Mépris* (1963). Ultimately, Wojtowicz's multiple roles create the effect of a movie within a movie, while breaking the immersive effect of narrative usually associated with cinema, television and various other portrayals of fiction. At several points in the video, Wojtowicz admits the disturbing fact that he cannot recall some of the facts

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<sup>53</sup> Tom McDonough, "No Ghost" *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 109.

of the robbery, and instead substitutes “memories” from Lumet’s film, thereby creating a “third memory” (a term found in the writings Henri Bergson but also of Gilles Deleuze’s theories). The final production juxtaposes scenes of the reenactment with sections from the movie, inviting a comparison (and confusion) between the two characters and the two stories – the real and the fictional. Poignantly, Wojtowicz recalls that before the robbery, he and his partner went to see *The Godfather* – a movie featuring Al Pacino – to “inspire the troops”; in other words, a real bank robbery is inspired by a movie, and eventually inspires a movie in its own right. Such project emphasizes the subject lack of criticality with the spectacle and becomes one of its casualties.

Huyghe has developed many other related works based on notions of scripts and scenarios that address storytelling and spectacle with the aim of both disclosing and questioning its construction, some with more positive outcomes than previously described. The best example is perhaps his project *Streamside Day Follies*, a single-channel video first shown in 2004 at Dia Chelsea. (Fig. 99) This work was originally created as a public art project for a new suburban settlement called Streamside Knolls, located in Fishskill (NY), 50 miles north of New York City. Huyghe observed that Fishskill, as a new town, attracted a diverse population from very different cultural backgrounds, but these people often had nothing in common and had in fact, very limited social contact with each other. This project brings to mind Forest’s *Portrait de Famille* (1967), which also attempted to fight the isolation experienced by the inhabitants at L’Hay-les-Roses by using an artistic activity to initiate social interaction. In *Streamside* Huyghe invited the town’s residents to attend a parade on Main Street and to contribute to the creation of a day of festivities with their families. The parade also included city employees, government officials,

and local organizations – represented by fire trucks, police cars and postal workers – and featured a speech by the mayor, children wearing oversized animal masks, an ice cream truck and tables filled with colorful donuts and pies. At night, a folk music concert was held. Huyghe’s aim in organizing this celebration was to set in motion the simulacrum of a celebration – a copy without an original – thereby initiating a community tradition or ritual that could be replicated year after year. The hope was that through such a celebration, the residents of Streamside Knolls would eventually build ties and memories that would connect them in the future. As Huyghe explains, this project was a recipe, a script or a score to play again, and a model of social relationship.<sup>54</sup> In the event, however, town residents have not appropriated the tradition begun by Huyghe, and to this day the celebration has not been replicated. Nevertheless, what is relevant here is Huyghe’s interest in how traditions are born and made. This suggests that doubled spectacle, as Godfrey conceives it, is also a space for social interaction and he claims, “Whereas for Debord the spectacle produces alienation and separation, Huyghe’s fiction results in cooperation and new experiences.”<sup>55</sup> This quote targets Debord’s prime warning that “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship among people, mediated by images. The spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, a superadded decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society”.<sup>56</sup> Arguably, the ones benefiting from these

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<sup>54</sup> Baker, " Interview with Pierre Huyghe," 84.

<sup>55</sup> Godfrey, “Pierre Huyghe’s Double Spectacle,” 53.

<sup>56</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Perlman and Supak (1970), sections 6.

“cooperation” and “new experiences”, who interacted directly with the project and the artist, only represent a very limited number of people, which is often found in the art institution, as Bishop points out. Even so, the often fragmented projects of Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno are best witnessed first hand, as they usually develop in stages, are difficult to reconstruct and sometimes cannot even be recounted adequately with words. Nevertheless, double spectacle also adds a critical dimension to their work that is rarely acknowledged, but which becomes obvious in regards to their use of spectatorship and its relationship to the screen, which also has a larger influence on casual viewers discovering the completed work or unfamiliar with the artists specifically, or with contemporary art. The screen is used as an interface, offering opportunities for the viewer to enter it, even while they remain critical of immersion, and prefer to address the spectator’s awareness of being an audience of spectacle; this helps to create a knowing separation between real and fictional, which are so often merged in our contemporary age.

This chapter has attempted to establish connections between the work of Laurette, Gonzalez-Foerster, Huyghe and Parreno in regards to their approach to spectatorship and the screen. They have experimented with spectatorship and social engagement in diverse ways, some of them rarely encountered before in the visual arts. Even if, in this framework, their respective artistic practices complement one another, it must be noted that their works show also very distinct particularities. Laurette juxtaposes art and spectacle and addresses at once its respective audiences, Gonzalez-Foerster explores intimacy and subjectivity of her subject as well as of her viewer, Parreno’s interest in what is “false” or in outdated pop culture invites the reflection of one’s relationship with the spectacle, while Huyghe’s poetic exploration of fantasy, merge reality

and fiction, and frequently invite the viewer in and out of his work. The last three in particular, like their predecessors in the 1980s, engage with narrative as a starting point for their work. However, this does not prevent their altered performances and fictionalized realities having a critical distance on their objects of study.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation reconstructs key moments in the history of video-based art in France, starting with its origins in portable video in the 1960s, up to the present day, when it appears most frequently in the form of video installations with a hybridized relationship between performance, installation and the projected image. In the late 1960s, when video first emerged as a new technology, it had a privileged relationship to television, which developed concurrently and also grew in importance throughout the 1970s as television entered the majority of French households. Both video and television offered new viewing experiences and shared many formal characteristics, since television monitors were first used to show experimental video, rather than projection (ie the cinema model). In French, television viewers were given a specific name, *télespectateurs*, to characterize the televisual viewing experience in comparison with other modes of spectatorship. At its inception, early video makers (especially in the US) regarded television with ambivalence, as it represented the possibility of a democratic means of distribution, even while its content was seen as too populist. In France, however, due to the strict control exercised by the state over television, there were far fewer opportunities for artist's video to be broadcast. There were only a few early videos commissioned for television; they are mostly related to the activities of the Groupe de Recherche sur l'Image at the Services de la Recherche of ORTF (1954-1974). Other examples include Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1978), a series of twelve short videos, which were commissioned but ultimately considered inappropriate for public television. Thus, already in the

1970s, experimental video often developed in dialogue with television. Significantly, videographers acknowledged the presence and impact of television in everyday life and even attempted to offer a counter-production that reacted to television's content and programs. Even if video was sometimes associated with the (then marginalized) field of experimental cinema, early video was generally disregarded by the film industry on the basis of its amateurism and poor technical quality, as well as an incompatibility of formats. To be fair, it must be said that early video makers in France, developing their work in a militant and sociological context, did not intend to compete or be in dialogue with cinema. As a consequence, early video artists often created their own modes of distribution, such as the guerilla street strategies used by women's video collectives or the vandal media inserts and interventions created by Fred Forest, discussed in Chapters One and Two.

In the late 1970s art world, editorial, curatorial, and institutional initiatives showed signs of interest in video as a medium and started presenting it in museums. However, the full range of video production was not fully acknowledged. Videos by women's collectives were totally ignored, despite representing a significant moment in the French history of video. It must be recalled that members of collectives, regardless of their practice of various artistic forms (literature, slogan, song writing, photography or videos), did not identify themselves at the time as artists. In addition, they initiated various anti-institutional tactics that also prevented them from being acknowledged and recognized by institutions. In addition to ignoring image permissions, they refused to comply with the federal regulation of *Dépôt Légal*, the legal notice for registration of copyright that allows authors, artists, and researchers to catalogue their

production at the French National Library and thereby to make it available to the library's readership. Unsurprisingly, women's collectives originally saw these conventions as an unhelpful and patriarchal institutional gesture. As a result of these tactics, however, their production remains almost undocumented today.

Nevertheless, art institutions only briefly embraced video's cultural specificity with *Art sociologique*, *Art socio-critique* and *Art écologique* – these trends that originated in France in the 1970s and developed throughout the 1980s –, which quickly disappeared from sight in the same decade, even if the artists were still producing works. *Art socio-critique* and *Art écologique*, and derivative practices from the 1980s, are today still barely documented, difficult to locate, and should benefit from a larger attention than the one currently given by the institution, by scholars as well as by the current dissertation. Nevertheless, it was clear by the early 1980s that the institutional direction for video art had shifted towards a more international model. In France, experimental video became *Video Art*, a classification that excluded local militant and *Art sociologique* practices, and which instead preferred a medium-specific, formal, and technophilic approach. The dominant model for *Video Art* that emerged and developed in France was inspired by early US video, already omnipresent on the international art market, and which was the first choice for exhibition in and acquisition by French institutions at the time. US video is particularly well represented in French national collections (see Chapter Three). It is only since the 1990s that the Centre Georges Pompidou's acquisitions represent a larger diversity of artists, including a larger proportion of French artists. There is therefore an important distinction in France between the history and the diversity of video practices and the history of *Video Art*.

In 1981, with the election of Mitterrand as President of France, women's collectives who had produced militant video in the previous decade now obtained governmental support; in 1982, Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig and Iona Wieder, all former members of the collective Les Insoumuses (1975-81) opened the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, which gave them more agency and visibility. At the same time, they started receiving commissions from television, as well as from public and governmental organizations, which allowed them to continue working with video. However, it is undeniable that government support and the opportunity for commission-based work resulted in a dulling of their militant edge, and somewhat worked against the original intentions of these practices. Indeed, even if the issues they addressed in the 1980s remained consistent with those of the 1970s – feminism, women's achievements, incest, rape and domestic violence – the later video productions do not have the strength, historical significance or artistic interest of the earlier ones. They are in color, rather than black and white, are better edited, more visually elaborated, and ultimately lean toward more conventional documentary forms. For example, in the 1980s Carole Roussopoulos created a series of videos for French television on the theme of women's accomplishments and new women's professions (actress, farmer, fisherwoman, etc.).<sup>1</sup> But even if these later productions do not have the same intensity as their antecedents, this shift in itself should not lessen the contribution of women's collectives to the history of French video art. They demonstrate the first use of portable video for socio-political purposes after the social uprising in post-1968 France

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<sup>1</sup> See Carole Roussopoulos: *Profession... Comédienne!* ("Profession... Actress!", 1980), *Profession: agricultrice* ("Profession: Farmer", 1982), *Des femmes maghrébines créent des emplois* ("Maghreb Women create jobs", 1986).

and exemplify a shared climate of hopes and ambitions, of belligerence and impatience to see real advancements taking place in society. The use of video by women's collectives itself represents an achievement, as collective members chose this new medium to express themselves and used it both professionally and independently.

Despite these professional opportunities for women, however, it must be acknowledged that the 1980s often coincided with increased family responsibilities for them. Even more problematic was the fact that this first generation of women videographers did not nurture followers in the next generation who would support their cause and continue to build on their legacy. In the 1980s in France, feminism lost its verve and popularity; it was already perceived as old-fashioned, and even became a derogatory term.<sup>2</sup> In the past few years, interest in feminism has been revived in France, seen in the Archives Féministes colloquium at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France François Mitterrand in November 2004, the *Hommage à Carole Roussopoulos* at the Cinémathèque Française in 2007, as well as the critically acclaimed *Elles@centrepompidou* exhibition, an uncompromising and long overdue survey of women's art that was nonetheless very successful and on view for almost two years at the Centre Georges Pompidou (May 2009 to February 2011).<sup>3</sup> However, this initial rejection of feminism through indifference was related to an overall climate of depoliticization and disaffection with politics in

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ginette Vincendeau, "Women's Cinema, Film Theory, and Feminism in France": 4-18.

<sup>3</sup> Etienne Sandrin also organized at the Centre Pompidou, in 2011, a projection and panel discussion on the topic of 1970s feminist militant video, which involved, among others, Anne-Marie Faure and Nicole Fernandez-Ferrer.

the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a shift that arguably stemmed from the end of sixties utopianism. Characterizing the climate of the 1980s in comparison to the 1990s, Kristin Ross explains: “And there are signs that a new conjuncture had been reached in France, a new impatience with the liberal order, a questioning of the reigning ideology – or what had come to be called in the 1980s, when the word ideology had itself become too ideological to mention – ‘*la pensée unique*’.”<sup>4</sup> The reference to “blinker thought” refers to a unidirectional way of thinking and suggests that, in the 1980s, an anti-demagogical attitude dominated. Significantly, this new attitude towards politics also coincided with the punk movement of the late 1970s, which in France helped to spread an anti-institutional, anti-intellectual and apolitical mood that impacted upon French culture and visual arts.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to women’s collectives, in the 1980s Fred Forest received no increase in governmental support or institutional opportunities, which is to say that he continued to receive nothing at all. The Collectif d’art sociologique stopped its activities as a group in 1984, but Forest continued to develop his Art sociologique, and to date he still struggles to obtain official recognition and visibility for his work. By securing faculty positions in art schools and universities, Forest has created a situation that allows him to continue his artistic practice independently. (He is currently retired but taught at the National School of Art in Cergy, and was

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<sup>4</sup> Kristin Ross, *May ’68*, 213.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the punk movement’s impact on the visual arts, see Eric de Chassey, *Europunk: The Visual Culture in Europe 1976-1980*, an exhibition organized for the Villa Medici in Rome, 2011. This exhibition presented the visual production of the punk movement in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands and Italy.

in charge of the Chair of Sciences of Information and Communication at the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis in France.) He continues to articulate a strong anti-institutional position, although this has necessarily brought him a reputation as an unappealing *persona non grata* in the eyes of many French artistic institutions. Since the 1970s, Forest has been undeniably active in France with his brand of institutional critique; but he is much less known than Daniel Buren, who is paradoxically the artist now most represented in French national and public collections. However, Forest continues to aspire to be part of the institution and act upon it from within.

Video Art, which received the bulk of institutional support during the 1980s, showed a significant shift away from the political vigor of the previous decade. Artists such as Thierry Kuntzel and Robert Cahun were typical within the French video scene for their abandonment of socio-political subject matter and a rejection of direct confrontational strategies. Instead, they favored a formalist and introspective work, driven by semiological theory, which they (like many video artists of the 1980s) used to justify an anti-demagogical position. Unlike previous video makers who sought to reinforce a sense of community and collective action, 1980s video artists preferred to work autonomously, and systematically eschewed affiliation with groups, collectives or tendencies. This abandonment of socio-political concerns as well as of collective work can be extended beyond video to the French art scene of the 1980s as a whole. Bruno Rousselot, a French geometric abstract painter who began his artistic career in the early 1980s, corroborates that this was also the case with painting.<sup>6</sup> It is in this context that the artists now known for their association with Relational Aesthetics emerged in the late 1980s. Despite their lack of a clear

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<sup>6</sup> Rousselot, interview with the author, Paris, June 18, 2011.

socio-political target, artists such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno definitively reinvigorated participatory principles and collective working models from the 1970s, that had been considered long gone from French art. They worked collaboratively (or collectively within an association of artists) and developed a discourse on sociability. The work of these artists was first shown in France in an alternative network of associative institutions located outside of Paris that were known for their experimental approach to art, and which expanded in the 1980s due to funding and partnerships established by the Socialist government.

In this study of the relationship between the viewer and screen in the history of art using television, video, installation, and the projected image in French art, each chronological episode is also representative of different methodological approaches to spectatorship and is an attempt to draw connections between specific models of viewership and various modes of political engagement by artists. French militant video by women's collectives, for example, addresses the viewer frontally – it creates a unilateral relationship between the viewer and the screen, and often abruptly and confrontationally communicates clear socio-political claims concerning women's and minoritarian rights within French society in the 1970s. The favored format for militant production, the video-portrait, also helped to create a sense of identification between the female viewer and the sitter, and thereby helped to build a climate of sisterhood. Furthermore, the unconventional modes of distribution adopted for this type of production were intended to reach a larger spectatorship than that attainable by feminist or union meetings alone, and to create

disturbance in everyday life through the use of provocative public venues and guerilla street strategies.

Similarly, Forest's *détournement* of various mass media functions and strategies also attempts to reach a larger audience. However, in contrast to militant feminist video makers who did not want to identify themselves as artists, Forest's insistence on being part of the artistic field eventually required him to reach out to an audience that does not frequent museums. Even if his artistic actions rarely carry a clear political message and do not specifically enunciate or represent his own socio-political convictions, the processes that he establishes in his work, and through which he calls into question the structures of French institutions, are implicitly critical. In particular, his interest in experimenting early on with the possibilities of interaction and viewer participation, as well as his approach to the concept of shared authorship, undeniably opens up spaces for the audience's ability to affect the content as well as the form of the final work. The confrontational approach of militant artists became, in Forest's work, a benign invitation to the viewer, who is encouraged in a rather demagogical manner to state his or her opinion, rather than be persuaded to adopt a cause. Of course, the value and interest of the audience in participating in and accomplishing Forest's actions remains a thorny question, unanswered by this study. But because he fought against a monodirectional model of communication, and invested in the possibilities of feedback, Forest's conception of the relationship between the viewer and the screen suggests a permeable interface through which artist and viewer can freely communicate and exchange, anticipating the feedback loops of Web 2.0.

An interaction between the viewer and the screen is also a central concept in 1980s French Video Art. Unlike Forest's early works, however, the form and intensity of this interaction changed; instead of a direct, collective, active collaboration and social exchange, 1980s video proposed a more individual and introspective experience. These conceptions resulted in Raymond Bellour's idea of a "pensive viewer", based on the meditative and immersive qualities of 1980s video-based works. In Video Art, there is no longer any claim to a socio-political position or message, and even if artists manifest a strong interest in narrative they rarely present a clear storyline. The artists' agenda is a more general exploration of time and memory, and of the artistic potential of the viewer's imagination when experiencing a video's formal variations. Here, the viewer's agency resides in the open-endedness of the work and in the level of appropriation that the viewer is willing or able to make of it, which could influence and change the content as well as on the meaning of the work. The exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, curated by philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in 1985, exemplifies a similar approach and theoretical framework. It illustrates Lyotard's fascination for technology as a pretext for creating an opportunity for the viewer to manipulate machines and experiment with situations unfolding during his or her free movement around the exhibition.

*Les Immatériaux* was a landmark exhibition, not least in its specific address to spectatorship; it also became a major influence for a significant number of artists involved with Relational Aesthetics in the 1990s. The work that they developed included numerous video-based productions, which also attest to a renewed interest in spectatorship as they created situations with which the viewer could experiment, and preferably collectively rather than

individually. However, the most critical dimension of their work resides in their acknowledgment of the omnipresence of spectacle, which they deploy as a means to address the viewer's consciousness of his/her position as spectator in an exhibition or work of art (and thereby in society at large), hence their emphasis on the visibility of viewers to each other.

Beyond the observation that screens have become omnipresent in everyday life (via computers, smartphones, etc.), the artistic evolution of the relationship between the viewer and older models (television, video and the projected image) shows that a wide range of viewer positions have been envisioned by artists from the late 1960s to the present, and in relation to different social, political, economical and cultural contexts. In the earliest works the viewer is the receiver of a message, and the content of the work is primarily didactic or ideological. Later works, whether individual or collective, are more participatory and interactive, but pay less attention to specific socio-political concerns and themes. This development can be explained by the vicissitudes of recent French political history, philosophical tradition, cultural politics and institutional history – factors that are unfortunately too often overlooked in current scholarship and criticism on French art, even while they are indispensable for understanding changes in the French art scene over the last fifty years (Socialism, cultural politics, French artistic geography, poststructuralism, etc.). Is there a connection or a correlation between specific models of spectatorship in screen-based art and specific modes of political engagements in the visual arts? The answer is both “yes” and “no”: ultimately politics of spectatorships have prevailed, as is evidenced by changes in the modality of models of spectatorship and the relationship created between the viewer and the screen over time. This allows us to isolate different operative modes

– individual or collective, immersive or dissociative – but, so far, they do not show a specific or predictable pattern that applies to a particular socio-political situation or to an implicit socio-political commitment on the part of the artists themselves.

Such a study should, therefore, not be restricted solely to French art, and similar research in comparative studies should incorporate other geographical and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, this current examination already shows that there are significant cultural exceptions to the French situation and to its video-based productions that provide an informative contrast with other modes of production and interpretation of video art, and as such this research represents an alternative history to better known and documented Anglo-American models and discourses. In addition, this analysis of the evolution of the relationship between the viewer and the screen could also be expanded to include digital and net art, in order to anticipate how this history is developing in reaction to the prevalent forms of screen today – computers and smartphones – which present new modalities of self-representation and social interactions, while simultaneously being physically distant or absent.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

**Illustrations are available, as images and with video extracts, in a PowerPoint document found on the DVD provided with the dissertation.**

### VIDEOGRAPHY (selection)

Martial Raysse, *Identité, maintenant vous êtes un Martial Raysse*, 1967, closed-circuit video installation, camera, monitor, wooden surface, variable dimensions (Collection Nouveaux Médias, Centre Pompidou, Paris).

Fred Forest and Luc Ferrari, *Interrogation 69*, May 1969, multimedia installation and sound environment, sketch and exhibition views (Galerie Sainte-Croix, Tours).

Fred Forest, *La cabine téléphonique*, Fall 1969, black and white video, silent, 32'00 (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

———, *Le mur d'Arles*, Fall 1969, black and white video, silent, 17'00 (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

Carole Roussopoulos, *Jean Genet parle d'Angela Davis*, October 1970, black and white video, sound, 7'00 (Nouveaux Médias collection Centre Pompidou, Paris).

Cathy Bernheim, Ned Burgess, Catherine Deudon, Suzanne Fenn and Annette Levy-Willard (M.L.F), *La grève des femmes à Troyes*, 1971, black and white video, sound, 55'00 (Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris).

Video Out (Carole and Paul Roussopoulos), *F.H.A.R. (Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire)*, 1971, black and white video, sound, 25'00 (Association Carole Roussopoulos, Paris).

———, *Y'a qu'à pas baiser*, 1971-3, black and white video, sound, 17'00 (Association Carole

Roussopoulos, Paris).

Fred Forest, *Le Grand Glacier*, 1972, black and white video, sound, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

———, *Action: 60 secondes de blanc*, January 20, 1972, action during Télé-Midi on French TV Antenne 2, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

———, *Vidéo – Troisième âge*, June 25 to July 11, 1973, action in an elderly home as a series of black and white videos, sound, variable durations (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

Video Out (Carole and Paul Roussopoulos), *LIP 1*, 1973, black and white video, sound, 25'00 (Association Carole Roussopoulos, Paris).

Fred Forest, *Les gestes du coiffeur*, 1974, black and white video, sound, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

———, *Vidéo-portrait d'un collectionneur*, June 1974, video action and black and white video, sound, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

Nil Yalter, *La femme sans tête ou la danse du ventre*, 1974, black and white video, sound, 24'47 (FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris).

Fred Forest, *Télé-choc télé-change*, March 22 and April 19, 1975, series of action during Un jour futur on French television Antenne 2, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

Collectif d'art sociologique (Hervé Fisher, Fred Forest and Jean-Paul Thenot),

*Conversations: Neuenkirchen est-elle un paradis?*, June 1975, street actions recorded with black and white video, sound, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

Léa Lublin, *Qu'est-ce que l'art*, June 1975, street actions recorded with black and white video, sound, duration unknown, exhibition *Une expérience socio-écologique: photo, film, and video: Neuenkirchen* (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris).

Les Insoumuses (Carole Roussopoulos, Nadja Ringart, Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder), *Maso et Miso vont en bateau*, 1975, black and white video, sound, 55'00 (Collection Nouveaux Médias, Centre Pompidou, Paris).

Delphine Seyrig with Les Insoumuses (Carole Roussopoulos and Ioana Wieder), *Inès*, 1975, black and white video, sound, 19'00 (Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris).

Video Out (Carole and Paul Roussopoulos), *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent*, 1975, black and white video, sound, 46'00 (Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris).

Nil Yalter, *Neuenkirchen*, June 1975, black and white video, sound, 15'00, exhibition *Une expérience socio-écologique: photo, film, and video: Neuenkirchen* (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris).

Delphine Seyrig, *Sois belle et tais-toi*, 1975-6, black and white video, sound, 111'00 (Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris).

Les Insoumuses (Delphine Seyrig and Carole Roussopoulos), *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, 1976, black and white video, sound, 27'00 (Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris).

Video Out (Carole and Paul Roussopoulos), *LIP 5*, 1976, black and white video, sound, 30'00 (Association Carole Roussopoulos, Paris).

Jean Dupuy, *Artistes Propaganda I (New York)*, 1977, color video, sound, 60'00 (Collection Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

Ioana Wieder with Les Insoumuses, *Accouche!*, 1977, black and white video, sound, 48'57 (Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris).

Thierry Kuntzel, *Nostos I*, 1979, color video, silent, 45'00 (Collection Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

Robert Cahen, *Juste le temps*, 1983, color video, sound, 13'00 (Collection Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

Thierry Kuntzel, *Nostris II*, 1984, video installation, 9 monitors, black and white video, sound, 22'00 (Collection Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

Matthieu Laurette, *Self-proclamation as "multi-media artist,"* March 16, 1993, appearance during Tournez manège on French TV, TF1, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

———, *Apparition*, January 5, 1995, TV appearance during La grande Famille on Canal +, durations unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

———, *Produits Remboursés - Je passe à la télé*, May 16, 1996, TV appearance during Je passe à la télé on France 3, duration unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

Pierre Huyghe, *Blanche Neige Lucie*, 1997, color video, sound, 4'00 – video

(Marian Goodman, New York).

———, *The Third Memory*, 1999, two-channel video, sound, 9'46 (Collection Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

Matthieu Laurette, *El Gran Trueque*, January 2000, television show copyrighted by the artist (Spanish TV, Canal Bizkaia, Bilbao).

Pierre Huyghe, *Streamside Day Follies*, 2004, single-channel video, sound, unknown duration (Dia Chelsea: New York).

Matthieu Laurette, *Déjà-vu: International Look-Alike Convention - Dia Center Fall Gala*, 2004, performance recorded with video, duration unknown (Dia Art Foundation, New York).

———, *GUY DEBORD IS SO COOL!*, December 31, 2004, appearance during the *Today Show* on NBC, duration unknown (US television NBC, New York).

Pierre Huyghe, *A Journey that Wasn't*, 2005, color video, sound, 30'00 (Collection Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

Matthieu Laurette, *JACQUES RANCIERE IS SO COOL!*, October 30, 2009, appearance during the *Today Show* on NBC, duration unknown (US television NBC, New York).

Christian Rouaud, *Les LIP, l'imagination au pouvoir*, 2009, video, 118'00 (Paris: Les Films d'Ici).

Matthieu Laurette, *Apparition* (January 19, 2011), TV appearance during *Silence ça pousse* on France 5, durations unknown (INA Archives, BNF/Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

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